

Growing up on the River at Dixon
By Opal Cajune

Some of my earliest memories are of the river. I remember walking down through the sand back of Auntie's barn toward the river and smelling that first damp slightly fishy smell and breathing very deep to absorb it all. My mother cooked our dinner in a big iron pot over an open fire. We stayed all day playing in the water. I think it was in that place that I first learned to swim.

When we got older we could go across the bridge by ourselves and swim on the other side. Most summers we spent all day there. It was kind of a "rite of passage" when a young person was able to "swim the channel." That meant swimming from the shore to the island as soon as the water was not so swift as to carry you downstream. I did that many times.

The island was a magical place; wooded with warm pools deep enough to swim in all lined with sand.

Down by the "old ferry" past the bridge it was a pure delight to see how far you could wade out into the river. Sometimes you could almost wade across except the water was so swift you could not stand up. I did that again several years ago and the wonder and delight was still there. In the spring and the fall we would walk across the bridge, build a campfire and listen to the wind in the pine trees. The trees there by the river sing their own song. I have listened for that song in other places, but they sing a different song in the mountains. The river trees sing a song that gathers you and holds you in a special healing place wherever you are whether on it or in it. The river has its own magic that calls you back. I like the words of this man who had his own river:

*I know the sound the river makes by dawn, by night, by day,
But can it stay me through tomorrow that finds me far away?*

I caught my first fish in the river with my dad helping me. I can still see the two Indian women who fished the river at Dixon. We would see them go by in their canvas shoes or waders with their poles and straw hats. They would be gone a long time. They might stop later to talk about their luck that day or to show their fish.

In the spring and early summer the river got very high. People from town would go by our house every day to measure how many feet the river had risen. This was scary and exciting to the children. The river would come up to the top of the bank and overflow in some low places. One place was by our house and we would then swim in the slough created in the ditch where the water was warm and the bottom soft and grassy. At night, with the windows open, the river made a roaring sound. The older people would discuss "the high water" at great length and wonder if the piers would hold up what with all the big logs and trees being washed down. Sometimes I would venture over to the bridge and look at the deep rushing water with whirlpools everywhere. It taught me to respect the power hidden there and later when we could swim in it as the river tamed and receded we were very careful to not get caught in a whirlpool.

During the swimming season, every one in our little town swam there. Even Mrs. Daniels. We were quite awestruck when this portly lady showed up in her vintage woolen swimsuit. The children would all hold their breath as she waded in, looking to see if the river really did raise two feet when she got in as one old man predicted. It would be an especially exciting day if Jackie Liberty came because he would climb to the highest part of the bridge and dive off the very top in a beautiful graceful swan dive right down into the swirling whirlpools. Everyone waited to make sure he came up before the water play began again.

There was a feeling of community evolving around the river for that short season and children would feel so very comfortable in it. I can't measure how much the river added to the quality of our lives but I know it lives on in my family. The river was always there for me like a patient waiting presence. Predictable in its seasons, dispersing a blessing to who ever would receive it. It has not changed. I still get the same feeling when I wade into the water, feel it close over my head and open my eyes to the murky green. I come up out of the water feeling like I am part of the river, a new creation, a river spirit.



The Lower Flathead River in autumn, courtesy of Eugene Beckes