

Little Fork River, Minnesota

## 1. The area surrounding the river:

a. The Little Fork watershed is located in Itasca, St. Louis, and Koochiching Counties, Minnesota. It rises in a rather flat region in St. Louis County and follows a meandering course to the northwest through Koochiching County to its junction with the Rainy River about 19 miles below Little Fork, Minnesota. The area is a hummocky rolling surface made up of morainic deposits and glacial drift laid over a bedrock composed largely of granitic, volcanic, and metamorphic rocks.

The upper basin is covered with dense cedar forests with some trees up to three feet in diameter. Needles form a thick layer over the ground with ferns turning the forest floor into a green carpet. In the lower basin the forest changes to hardwoods with elm predominating. Dense brush covers the forest floor.

Farming is the major land use other than timber production in the area of Minnesota, but terrain limits areas where farming is practical.

Transportation routes in this area are good due to its proximity to International Falls, Minnesota, a major border crossing into Canada. U. S. 53 runs north-south to International Falls about 25 miles east of the basin. U. S. 71 runs northeast-southwest and crosses the river at Little Fork, Minnesota, and follows the U. S. /Canadian border to International Falls. Minnesota Route 217 connects these two major north-south routes in an east-west direction from Little Fork, Minnesota. Minnesota Route 65 follows the river southward from Little Fork, Minnesota.

b. Population within a 50-mile radius was estimated at 173,000 in 1970. International Falls, Minnesota, is the major community in the area with a population of 6,440 in 1970.

c. The Little Fork River flows through Koochiching State Forest and Sturgeon River State Forest. Pine Island State Forest is just west of the river as is Smokey Bear State Forest and Big Fork State Forest. Kabetogama State Forest lies just west of the river and George Washington State Forest lies just south of the basin. The Superior National Forest lies south and east of the basin and the Boundary Waters canoe area is about 40 miles to the east. Lake of the Woods is located 65 miles northwest and Red Lake

Reservoir lies 50 miles due west. Lakes and free-flowing streams are abundant in this area of Minnesota and in Canada to the north. The Rainy River forms part of the international boundary.

2. River:

a. The Little Fork River is 132 miles from Cook, Minnesota, to the Rainy River. It averages 40-125 feet wide. Depth averages from one to 10 feet as one travels downstream. The average flow for 46 years of record is 1,009 cfs. See maps 1:250,000 Hibbing quadrangle and International Falls quadrangle.

b. The primary charm of the Little Fork River is its wild nature. Even in the farming areas the river flows through, a sense of wilderness permeates the air. The dense forest cover and the occasional large trees lining the banks are indeed "a sight to behold."

Wildlife abounds, moose inhabit the muskeg and tamarack swamps along the river. Deer browse in the farm meadows. Beaver and muskrat may be found in some of the smaller tributaries. Ducks and other common Minnesota birds may be observed.

Fishing in the river is said to be excellent. Muskellunge and walleyes are of primary interest. However, brown trout have been caught in the Little Fork and especially its tributaries.

c. There is no foam or evidence of pollution. The color is amber, typical of the northern Minnesota streams. Water temperature averaged 80 degrees Fahrenheit. The bottom material is generally silt or clay, except in the riffles, where it is rock.

d. When discussing this subject it is best to break the Little Fork into three parts--the upper, central, and lower sections.

The upper section extends from Cook, Minnesota, to the Highway 65 (Silverdale) bridge at River Mile 38.0. This stretch of the river has numerous farms along it, some of which extend down to the river's edge. There are also 10 bridges crossing the river in this section of which four have access to the river from them. Except for possible camping in a wayside park at River Mile 13.0, there are no developed camping areas. Fine camping areas exist at Hananen's Falls for the occasional camper in the area; however, heavy use would undoubtedly bring destruction.

The central section; i. e. , from the Silverdale Bridge (Highway 65) to River Mile 95.5; is some 57 miles long and is true wilderness. There is a camping and access area under the Silverdale Bridge; however, toilets, water, picnic tables, and fireplaces are needed. Other than the Silverdale Bridge, there are no developed campsites for the next 57 miles (the entire central section). Decent wilderness campsites are difficult to locate because of water supply, high banks, and brush problems. It is possible to camp on any of the numerous sandbars jutting into the river. However, this river is known for its rapidly changing water level, making this type of camping a dangerous sport at the least.

There are five access points to the central section. Except for two jeep-type access points within the Nett Lake Indian Reservation, there are no access points for 34 miles below the Silverdale Bridge. There are also no visible homes for 37 miles below the Silverdale Bridge (River Mile 37.8). These statistics add up to make this one of, if not, the longest stretch of wild river in the State of Minnesota.

The lower section of the Little Fork; i. e. , from River Mile 95.5 to the confluence with the Rainy River Mile 132.0; again is rather heavily developed with homes and farms. As Little Fork is approached from River Mile 95.5 homes become more numerous. Ed Johns sawmill is located at River Mile 109.0. The Little Fork River flows some two miles through the town of Little Fork, where everyday supplies may be purchased and the area's only hospital is located.

e. Many riffles and rapids form long, easily navigable pools above Little Fork. The riffles or rapids could be quite dangerous even in low water because they are fast and have very deep pools below them. Many of the rapids are formed by bedrock outcrops. Four of the rapids should be portaged even in low water. The till which overlies the bedrock is also exposed in many of the sloughs. Width varies from 40 to 125 feet.

The portion below Little Fork is navigable except at very low stage. There are no riffles in this reach. The river averages 160 feet wide.

Banks ranged from two to 10 feet high. Most are till except where bedrock has been exposed. Approximately three percent of the banks are open, ungrazed, and grazed meadows which make excellent camping sites. The forest contains poplar, maple, elm, and oak hardwoods, and pine and spruce. The banks along the forested areas are heavy with undergrowth.

The several abandoned farms could be developed into excellent parks and/or camping areas without destroying the wilderness environment or overdeveloping the area. Other camping areas are available along the river, but good ones are not spaced within a day's canoeing.

Access, generally steep, weedy, or brushy, is limited but is sufficient for a two-day canoe trip.

The river is in a high quality wilderness environment above Little Fork. It should be studied in more detail, so that it could be more completely assessed as to safety, desirability, and development needs.

f. The Little Fork River flows largely through state forest. The majority of the lower section is in public ownership, but the upper section has only scattered public holdings. See maps.

g. Public areas within a 50-mile radius:

<u>Area</u>	<u>Acres</u>
Superior National Forest	2,347,905
Koochiching State Forest	223,940
Sturgeon River State Forest	59,104
Pine Island State Forest	639,889
Smokey Bear State Forest	12,037
George Washington State Forest	106,983
Big Fork State Forest	47,665
Kabetogama State Forest	309,528
Bear Head Lake State Park	3,386
Tower-Soudan State Park	982
McCarthy Beach State Park	880

h. See the map.

3. The Little Fork is a beautiful, wild stream with great recreational potential. However, limited access and facilities are a hinderance. Having stated that the primary charm of the Little Fork River is its wild nature, it would appear that it should be developed on these lines. Access points should be few but undeveloped. Campsites should be of the wilderness variety except at access points where they would have full facilities.

4. The source for the information in this report was: Selected Rivers of Minnesota, Recreational Analysis. Midwest Planning and Research, Inc. September 1966. Water Resources Data for Minnesota. USGS, 1969. U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Minnesota, Final Population Counts, December 1970.