

Trip Report: Dem Bones

May 22, 2003

By Chris Hallaxs

Posted GreatLakesHikes YahooGroups.Com Message Board

Is it allowable to use an old Alice In Chains song title for a nature walk-type TR or does that violate some unwritten standard of congruity?

It has at least a dual relevance to the rest of this. Sometime recently, I was thinking that standing dead trees, and driftwood also, is basically tree skeletons. Tree bones. Dead bodies that lay everywhere in full sight, yet invoke not horror but almost welcome, comforting familiarity. This thought gains additional weight when considering that past evidence here and there indicates that it's apparently not anything unusual for an individual chunk of large driftwood to have been rolling around the beach for over a hundred years. Once in a great while, I see something on a beach that has features that allow you to date it with some reliability somehow. A shipbottom, for example, sometimes still with adz marks in the beams. Given that level of preservation, what does that say for some old beaten log laying on a beach somewhere? It begins to seem possible it's been here or there, buried for a while, floating for a year or two before being buried again, for perhaps several centuries. The time span is even longer for instances where a standing forest is swallowed by a dune, and then later the dune blows away again, leaving the standing dead trees.

I haven't done anything heavy the last couple of days in terms of hiking: just lazy strolls.

Yesterday around dusk, I waded some along the beach up at Whitefish point for a couple hours. Right in front of the lighthouse itself, at the end of the point, the water was so cold it made my feet BURN. From past experience with this sensation, I know that puts it within just a couple degrees of freezing at the warmest. Even at around 37 degrees it will merely cause that aching feeling like your bones are being crushed, but not make your hide feel like it's on fire. :-) It is rumored there is still ice in the harbor in Marquette. However, less than a mile west away from the end of the point, Lake Superior was merely cold, and entirely tolerable to walk in and out of in the course of wandering down the beach and checking out rocks and driftwood in and out of the water.

My sister and her husband (well, at least my sister--I'm not sure how thrilled he was about it :-)) wanted to go walk down a little bit of swamp trail at the mouth of the Tahquamenon river to the ghost site of the town of Emerson, on Lake Superior. Around 1900 or so, it was reportedly bigger than all of Paradise is today in population, but pretty much nothing is left now. I was a logging/sawmill town for a while, sawing the logs that came downriver, and loading them on boats, then apparently when the logs ran out a couple decades later, it was involved in commercial fishing for a bit, and then petered out. Not much left now but the trace of a road through the swamp, random bits of car

frames, broken pottery, glass, iron, and a bunch of bricks and pilings on the tiny island just off the mouth of the river where the sawmill once stood on the docks, I guess.

I've been out there twice in the winter, and actually have done the route I did today in the winter on snowshoes once, but it's much different now. My sister wanted help finding her way through. The old road is fairly easily followable for most of the way, but the last few hundred yards peters out into tag alder bog and grass and black mud, and you have to just forge on until you hit Lake Superior. This leaves you on shore pretty much directly in front of the island. I'd already stuffed my sandals in my backpack when the road ended and it looked like I was going to have to slog some mud. My sister about had an aneurysm. "YECH! I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE WALKING IN THAT *(#*@ BAREFOOT!!" LOL. Sheesh. Mud is fun, right? heh. Besides, whether they intended to or not, I was going to walk around in the lake some after I got to it, so no sense wearing anything on my feet.

I found it warm and also shallow and decided to walk to the island.

They actually followed me, after apparently waiting to see if I dropped out of sight under the surface before reaching the island, or something. All remarked that the water was actually pleasantly warm, even though they're both soft, recent-refugees from tropical Lansing, Michigan, albeit now transplanted to just below the bridge. :-D

The island is perhaps only a hundred feet in diameter, and not much more than a few feet above the lake level. It's a glorified sandbar with a bit of brush and a handful of stunted birch and maple trees. It's less than a quarter mile from shore, and at the moment at least, the water is at most knee deep if one chooses to just wade out to it. The water was also actually pretty warm here in the back end of Whitefish Bay, quite unlike up at Whitefish point yesterday. The island is, as I said, pretty much just a lot of loose bricks and pilings. The bricks alone are interesting though. I easily counted a half dozen different styles. Some have names imprinted on them. "P.M. & Co.", "Stevens" and "Massilano" I think was the third one. Rusty files seem to abound; found three of those. An iron bevel gear about 8" in diameter, some monster-sized hammerlink chain...

...hammerlink chain is often unofficially called "cornpicker chain" in my experience, because if you are familiar with farm equipment, cornpickers, especially the towable ones, tend to use it extensively. It's also seen on elevators and the beds of manure spreaders. Each link is a solid piece of metal with no moving parts. One end is a sort of cylindrical "hook" that catches around the bar at the other end of another link. The term "hammerlink" I suppose derives from the fact that you can assemble the stuff into arbitrary lengths by taking two links of it, holding them at the correct angle to each other, usually doubled back and acute, --by design being an angle that operating chain would never normally reach--and driving one sideways into the slotted hook on the other, at which point it sort of snaps on, and then can hinge freely at the joint. Repeat as necessary, or disassemble by the logical reversal of this procedure. Crude yet ingenious somehow. I knew this technology was old, but not quite THAT old. It is usually large-pitch stuff. The smallest I can offhand recall seeing was about 3/4 inch in pitch (distance

between identical points on consecutive links/distance between sprockets). This stuff was like 6", and the links were perhaps 4" wide. I was wondering if it ran something on the sawmill, or is just random junk that somehow got here?

Another curiosity was a length of 2" iron water pipe that ran a good deal of the way between the island and the shore. I was debating on whether this took water landward or from a well to the island? I'm tentatively guessing toward the island, and for a related reason guessing that it DOES belong to the island, and is not just random junk that ended up there. It's rather absurdly long and too perfectly running straight from the island to land to have wound up there by accident, and iron pipe doesn't float so doesn't tend to migrate much, I'd think. In short, it is pretty much where it was initially installed.

On the opposite side of the island, almost inline with this but extending instead away from land and out into the lake, was a similar long remnant of 6 or 8" cast iron sewer-type pipe. I followed this out into the water only to discover it simply stopped at some point. I puzzled over this a bit before happening to think that in 1890, no one probably thought much about dumping raw sewage into the lake. Combined with the other 'water' pipe, this might make sense. The only other thing I can figure is some sort of cooling water system. I don't know if the sawmill used gasoline or steam, or both at various times.

My sister found a bit of glass (seemingly from a bottle) with the letters: ERCE'S ORITE PTION on it. I'd hazard "Pierce's Favorite Prescription" was perhaps the full message?

Some spots on the island have bizarre arrangements of stacked planks sticking out of the sand at an angle, as if someone buried a 6 foot high stack of stickered planks, then lifted one end of the stack until it just reached out of the water and let the sand settle in and freeze them into that position. I can't tell if these are just natural accumulations of floating driftwood that the waves and currents have stacked and buried in an almost orderly way, or if maybe there actually were stacks of planks that like that which got abandoned or just fell off the docks or something and ended up stuck in the sand like that.

After that, we just followed the shore back around to the mouth of the Tahquamenon River, where there is a boat launch and parking lot. Lots of driftwood and such litters the beach all along here, and makes for interesting stuff to look at while splashing along through the shallow water. From there, it was only a minute or two to walk the short distance back to the truck parked on the highway at the start of the Emerson Trail, which we had started out on.

One of the high points of this walk to me is a skull I found in the sand near the island. My sister was likewise highly unimpressed with "that dead thing" but I dragged it home. I'm not sure what it belongs to. It seems to have died in the water and the critters in the sand had cleaned it up about perfectly, even if it was tinged brownish-green as a result. As far as I can guess, the possibilities are fox or bobcat. The canine teeth and one front incisor are missing, having fallen out, but otherwise it's in amazing condition. The

delicate, (impressive, awesome, fascinating) coral-like sinus bone structures are even visible in the nostrils in absolutely perfect undamaged detail, once I flushed the sand out of it. A short diluted bleach bath got rid of the green-brown alga stain.

I at first thought perhaps it was a raccoon, but the canines were way too big. Raccoon canines tend a bit more toward needle-like, as I recall. I'm not good at identifying skulls. For one thing, they are incredibly rare finds, as they usually are eaten and vanish quickly. I stumbled across a fairly freshly dead deer once in late June and went back a month later and the only thing I found, after literally crawling through the leaves in an ever widening spiral for 20 minutes or so, was one half of the lower jawbone. The rest might as well have vaporized. I'm curious to find out what this one is, though.