

# Giving the historical and beautiful Cass River a helping hand

By Tom Lounsbury

Formed by a glacier eons ago, the Cass River meandering westerly through Michigan's Thumb possesses its share of history. It was a major travel corridor through an immense wilderness for various Native American tribes for countless centuries, of which is testified by the Petroglyphs located on the banks of the Cass's North Branch in Sanilac County, that remains a sacred place for Native Americans to this day.

This River was named in honor of General Lewis Cass for the signing of the Treaty of Saginaw with Native Americans along its banks on September 24, 1819 (exactly 200 years ago), which ceded more than six million acres in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The Cass River would play a major role in the transformation of the Thumb with the early municipalities of Bridgeport, Frankenmuth, Tuscola, Vassar, Caro and Cass City owing their creation and development to being located near its banks. A whole lot of logs were also floated down the Cass River during the lumbering era to help supply the needs of a new and fast growing country, as well as it was used to power early lumber and grain mills.

During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Thumb wilderness was a well known Mecca for hunters seeking bear, deer and most notably, elk. The Cass River was the main access in reaching the hunting grounds which were located well upstream with the "Forks" being the hotspot (where the North Branch and South Branch join together to become one just south of Cass City, hence the name Elkland Township that the Village is located in). A good book which documents this is "The Hunting Expeditions of Oliver Hazard Perry", who wrote about his hunts and adventures near the Cass River in the great Thumb wilderness (during which he shot an enormous 8x8 bull elk).

Other avid paddlers and I had the opportunity last year to venture down the Cass River from the "Forks" at Cass City, all the way downstream to where it

ends by bumping into the Shiawassee River, which when soon also joined a short ways downstream by the Tittabawassee River, all becomes the Saginaw River, and we ended our journey, which required 5 day trips, at Wickes Park in Saginaw. This was the typical river trip taken by the elk hunters of long ago to return to Saginaw, and like them, we experienced a very serene and beautiful river. We also encountered an amazing amount of ospreys and bald eagles throughout our entire journey which says a lot about the fine water quality of the Cass River.

A group which has done a tremendous amount to promote and enhance this very unique environment is the Cass River Greenway (CRG) which was formed in 2007. The CRG has worked diligently with Federal, State and County agencies, as well as with Thumb area municipalities to promote the recreational opportunities and enhance the water quality of the Cass River. It has also developed a number of canoe/kayak launches, some of which are handicap accessible, as well as are responsible for the Cass River becoming an official water trail from Saginaw to M-46 (which I still call Enos Park). My hope is to eventually see the water trail extended further upstream, all the way to Evergreen Park on M-53. The Cass River for a fact is a superb river for canoers and kayakers, something I've been experiencing for most of my life and it remains to be my favorite river in Michigan.

An annual and major effort the CRG has been doing each summer is known as being a "Cass River Cleanup", where organized crews of volunteers pick up and remove garbage from various stretches of the river. This often involves a lot of wading, and cooperative muscle to get everything out, and it is wet and muddy work. You name it, and it has been found in the Cass River, but a real major item is rubber tires of all sizes, which never biodegrade, and are readily spread out and pushed downstream from the isolated country bridges they are tossed off (by ignorant idiots) by strong springtime currents. The rubber tires also aren't a simple pick up out of the water either, because they are filled with silt, mud and sand which has to be removed with a shovel or trowel beforehand, otherwise lifting them out is nearly impossible. All is then placed in a canoe or small boat to transfer out to a drop off location.

The Cass River is divided into two categories by the Caro Dam which was built in 1906 to meet the energy needs of a new and growing sugar beet industry. Upstream of the Caro Dam is known as being the Upper Reaches, and downstream is known as being the Lower Reaches. The CRG began its cleanup efforts on the Lower Reaches, and recent years have seen it diligently concentrating on the Upper Reaches as far upstream as the “Forks” at Cass City, which occurred two summers ago, downstream to the Dodge Road Bridge (not far from my farm – yep folks, I’m an Upper Reaches riverman), with an ongoing effort to continue downstream to Caro. Last summer had a cleanup from Dodge Road Bridge to the Hurds Corner Road Bridge, which among other trash items such as LP tanks, trash barrels and lawn chairs, was 110 tires, including large tractor tires. Obviously, the Dodge Road Bridge is a favorite late night drop-site the idiots use for getting rid of trash, especially tires.

Last Saturday morning, nearly 60 volunteers got together, thanks to the warm courtesy and hospitality of the Kappen Tree Service, to perform a CRG Cleanup from Hurds Corner Road, downstream to Forks Road. Four teams were formed with each covering a specific stretch of river. One team was even assigned to go upstream to retrieve a pile of tires which due to the high volume, had to be cached (and GPS marked) last year, for later removal.

Since the vast majority of the Cass River’s shoreline is privately owned, having landowners’ cooperation to allow access at certain points is critical, and I can state for a fact landowners on the Cass River truly appreciate seeing the river cleaned up, and often lend a helping hand in extracting the trash that has been gathered up and brought in by canoes to their location (for instance, Adam Rodriguez and Nicholas Pink were ready and waiting with their tractors and loaders which really smoothed matters out loading onto waiting trucks). All the trash is then hauled by truck to a specific location for later removal.

Last Saturday provided phenomenal sunny and warm weather for the Cass River Cleanup crews and all had a great time performing teamwork to extract mostly tires. A real challenge to all of this was maintaining their footing on the small, round rocks presently found on the Upper Reaches river bottom. The big

floods which occurred recently in May and June washed out a bunch of rocks which have been stored for centuries in the riverbanks, and had been perfectly rounded eons ago by the glacier.

I had a bit of a wade down the Cass River in July and can attest it is similar to walking on lubricated ball bearings (most of which are the size of billiard balls and are very animated when stepped on), and requires using a wading staff to stay upright. Throw in a strong current while wading on these moving rocks and I can assure you it is real easy to get some dents in your “tailgate”, because I ended up with a few! It is an example of how springtime floods can suddenly change the character of a river from year to year.

I fully support the efforts of the Cass River Greenway in placing a major focus on and continually improving and enhancing a very historical and beautiful river. For more information, go to [www.cassriver.org](http://www.cassriver.org) .