

HOW WILLIE WALLEYE WAS CAUGHT

by Ann Patten

A long time ago when the water in Lake of the Woods was much higher, an enormous flood carried a very big walleye down river to Baudette Bay. He was over 50 feet long with shiny gray scales the size of a garbage can lid. He was a very hungry fish who could eat a whole sturgeon for breakfast and another for lunch and could swallow whole cows if they wandered too close to the water.

When the floodwaters receded, the big walleye was stuck in his new home. Even back then, Lake of the Woods was a popular fishing spot, and news of the fish spread across the country. Three brothers from Bemidji named Bunyan heard about the walleye and became determined to catch him.

They took a 200-foot length of chain, tied one side to a steel pipe buried deep in the ground, and the other to a large meat hook with a whole ham stuck on it. The brothers threw the hook as far out into the water as they could and before long they felt a fierce pulling and tugging on the chain. All three grabbed hold and pulled with all their might, but the fish pulled harder. It pulled so hard, in fact, that a huge piece of land was torn off the shore, where the brothers stood next to the fastened chain.

They hung on and were towed like water-skiers down the river and into Lake of the Woods. The fish pulled them all over the lake for a week until he was played out and exhausted. By then, they found themselves far north and the piece of shore settled against Canada. Today it is called the Northwest Angle but is still considered part of Minnesota.

To bring the fish home, the brothers tied the chain to the end of a railroad train which towed it as far as Baudette. It was there that one of the brothers exclaimed, "Man that fish was a Willie," which is how he got his name.