

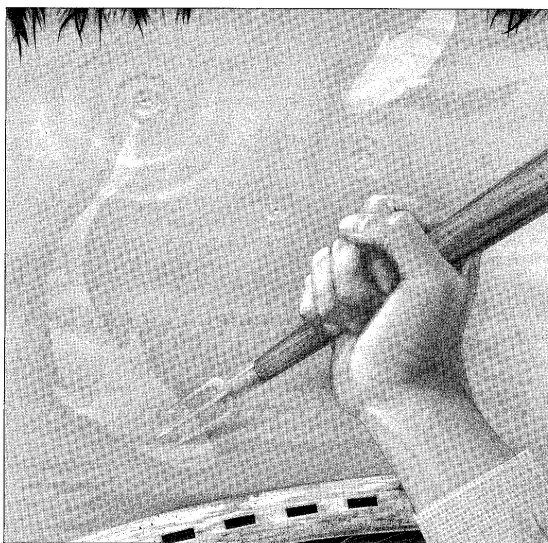
THE OLD MAN'S RIVER

Leigh McCracken gets his salmon the old-fashioned way—he spears it.

WHEN I MET LEIGH McCracken fifteen years ago, he was in his late fifties, a codger verging on geezer. Leigh is a semi-hermit who lives about four miles inland on one of the many small rivers that line the coast of Northern California. He has lived his entire life there on a good-size piece of land that has been inhabited by his family for three generations. His grandfather cleared the land in the late nineteenth century—the meadow and apple orchard around McCracken's house are still dotted with the stumps of virgin redwoods, some of which are fifteen feet tall and twenty feet in diameter.

To reach his place you need to either boat upstream from the coast or descend a steep logging road, a feat that in the winter is more safely accomplished on foot than in car. Considering its proximity to the Mendocino coast, it is land relatively unscathed by modern civilization. Bobcats stalk and mule deer graze freely. Big pileated woodpeckers (called "raincrows" by the locals) and a pair of great blue herons live in the valley. California nutmeg and wild ginger can be found if you know where to look.

It is a paradisaical spot with ever so many virtues. When the river rises in the winter, it deposits a fresh layer of topsoil on McCracken's vegetable garden. (Unfortunately, at the same time it also washes the fence away; Leigh builds a new one every spring.) At planting time, the ground is moist enough to preclude the need for water-



ing. Even in the driest part of the summer, the water table is close enough to the surface that the garden never needs to be watered. McCracken spends most of his time on his land. It's not that he is a misanthrope—on the contrary, he likes people, and visitors are always welcome. It's just that he is a shy, laconic man who would rather listen to the purposeful chatter of Steller's jays than to people's idle chitchat.

Besides McCracken's house, there is another dwelling on his property, a large, old, one-room log cabin that was inhabited by my friend Allen and his family. Allen and I had known each other as students in Berkeley. As common victims of graduate school burnout and early converts to the back-to-the-land movement of the late sixties, we had often fantasized about moving to the country. Allen made the break first. In the spring of 1967, he, his wife, Sarah, and their eight-year-old son, Jerry, left Berkeley for Mendocino County. A month later I got a postcard that said, "Eureka!" Below this one word

was a hand-drawn map.

I bought a 1958 International panel truck and converted it into an eminently livable camper. In early fall, bidding city life farewell, I set out for Allen's place. I followed his postcard map from interstate freeway to state highway to county road. I hit the dirt road on the map precisely at sundown and parked at the top of a hill, as the map instructed.

I was in the ecological zone known as Pygmy Forest, an area I was familiar with from previous exploratory visits to the region. The Pygmy Forest is a land belt several miles wide that runs along much of the Mendocino coast about three miles inland from the shore. The soil of the forest is excessively acidic, and all the trees are dwarfs. Walking around in the Pygmy, one feels like a prehistoric giant.

Exhausted from a day of driving and exhilarated at being in the country with darkness descending, I made dinner and went to bed.

I was up at dawn and started down the hill. Quickly, the Pygmy Forest ended and I was in Douglas fir and redwood terrain. After a few hundred yards, the road dipped sharply down and to the left, and all at once, the river valley with its morning fog was revealed to me. I caught my breath. "Eureka!" indeed. I sat down on the hillside and took it all in for a few minutes before making my way down to the log cabin, where Allen and Sarah already had breakfast going on a wood stove. As I'd expected, they were delighted to see me. I looked around the cabin. No electricity, no running water or indoor plumbing, no telephone, but, out the window, that valley—no doubt about it, they'd hit the jackpot.

After a very leisurely breakfast and

Freelance writer Jay Feldman lives in Winters. Leigh McCracken's real name and the name of his river are closely guarded secrets.

lots of catching up, Sarah took Jerry to school, and Allen invited me to come along and meet his landlord. "Listen, Jay," said Allen with a touch of reverence in his voice, "this guy knows *everything* about the woods." We ambled over to the house at the other end of the meadow. By the side of the house a small, middle-aged man was loading a pickup truck—chain saw, gas and oil cans, maul, and wedges. Allen made the introductions and we shook hands. Leigh's handshake exerted no pressure whatsoever, and he looked at me only briefly. He seemed faintly embarrassed by the formality.

"What are you up to, Leigh?" asked Allen.

"Goin' up to the logjam and cut some firewood," said McCracken.

"Okay if we come?"

"Sure."

We hopped in the truck and started upriver. A hundred yards beyond Allen's cabin the river narrowed dramatically and, a quarter mile later, McCracken pulled up alongside a huge entanglement of logs piled up in the bed of the river, which was now more like a large creek or stream. "River used to be much wider here, but these logs jammed it all up," said Leigh. The logs were "slash"—discards from the logging that had been going on for decades on the slopes of the side canyons that branched off the main valley. By cutting some of the logs out, McCracken was hoping to serve two purposes. First, he was gathering already-seasoned firewood for the approaching winter. Second, he was trying to break up the logjam and, with luck, get the river flowing more freely again, although, given the magnitude of the slash pile, he must have realized the futility of that intent.

We unloaded the truck and went to work—McCracken cutting, Allen splitting, myself hauling and stacking. Every now and then I stopped to watch Leigh. He was a wiry man, all muscle, and in excellent condition for his age. His chain saw was equipped with a 36-inch bar, the kind only a skilled operator would use. He handled it with ease.

We worked through the morning and knocked off for lunch. After lunch Leigh came by Allen's cabin.

"Wanna cut some more?" Allen asked him.

"No," he answered lazily. "We did enough work for one day. Let's go for a walk."

We walked upriver. When we came to the logjam, we looked over the morning's work and congratulated each other. I caught Leigh's eye, and in that brief instant, he silently confirmed that I was welcome here.

For the next few months I camped at the top of the hill. I ate in my truck or

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at the cabin and worked four or five mornings a week with Leigh and Allen cutting slash from the huge logjam and stacking firewood. Afternoons were spent walking in the woods or down the riverbank or, on rainy days, sitting by the fire and listening to McCracken tell stories in his slow, dry manner. He took us to see the sauna, deep in the woods, carved at the turn of the century by Finnish loggers into the hollow of a burned-out virgin redwood stump. He showed us the remains of a small settlement that had existed until the 1920s at the big bend in the river—all that survived were a dozen foundations, now overgrown, unrecognizable unless one knew they were there. He pointed out the edible mushrooms of the area and the native herbs and the habits of the local wildlife.

One afternoon during a rainy spell in November, Allen, Sarah, Jerry, and I took advantage of a break in the rain and went for a walk downriver. In the midafternoon Leigh came along in his pickup. About a mile farther downstream, he told us, a tree had fallen and was blocking the dirt road (mud road at that time of year) that ran along the riverbank. He had his big chain saw and was heading down to cut the fallen tree out of the road. Allen and I offered to help, but Leigh declined and went on his way.

About three-thirty, a light drizzle started. Since we were a couple of miles from home and, except for boots, without rain gear, we started back and soon heard Leigh's truck approaching. It appeared shortly heading toward us at a noticeably faster clip than Leigh would usually drive. "I wonder what's up," mused Allen as the truck bounced along, slipping and sliding up the muddy road, swerving to avoid the many puddles. When he reached us, Leigh pulled up and jumped out. Such haste was very unlike him. "The salmon are running," he exclaimed, visibly excited. "I'm gonna show you how we used to ketch 'em." We murmured with appreciative anticipation.

"Salmon" is a magic word in Mendocino. Even as newcomers, we were aware of the deep affection, even reverence, the local people held for these fish. For the past month, as the season approached, the fishermen and the old-timers would meaningfully say "salmon" and nod in recognition. Not only were salmon for eating, they were for selling, and in an area so financially depressed, salmon season was a needed shot in the arm for the local economy. As in many cultures that function with a scarcity of money, bartering was still a prime form of exchange, and salmon could be exchanged for just about anything. If you had salmon, you had gold. Giving salmon away to friends was considered the ultimate generosity, and doing so caused a person to be extremely well regarded. Leigh McCracken's own contribution to his annual Fourth of July potluck picnic is always a couple of large salmon, which he barbecues over an open wood fire. The event is always well attended.

"First we have to trap 'em," continued Leigh. "You two will stay here," he instructed, indicating Sarah and me. "Allen and Jerry will go up there. When the fish get up to you, you stamp your feet hard on the ground, and they'll turn around and come back down here. When they get here, you two stamp the same way, and they'll turn around and head back upstream again. You can keep 'em here forever that way."

We waited for the salmon. Unable to contain his excitement, Leigh paced up and down the bank, always keeping an eye downriver. His agitated pacing accentuated a limp that was usually barely noticeable. Perhaps fifteen minutes passed when he suddenly sang out, "Here they come!" Pointing downstream, he directed our attention to a fairly rapidly moving dark mass a couple hundred feet away. "Come on," he commanded, hurriedly leading Allen and Jerry upstream.

"I've never seen Leigh so excited," Sarah said to me as we watched them scamper up the road.

They positioned themselves about a hundred feet away from us. Sarah and I watched the dark mass approach. Soon it was close enough for us to differentiate individual fish. As the school went by, I guessed there to be several hundred salmon in it. Just before they reached our companions upstream, Leigh stamped his foot and, just as he'd predicted, the fish turned as one and fled downstream. We waited for them to get close, and when they did, we stamped. Once again they turned. The river was about 80 feet across at that point—we had hundreds of salmon virtually trapped in a 100-by-80-foot pool. We sent them back and forth a few

times until Leigh, satisfied that we'd got the hang of the method, announced he was going up to the house for the fishing gear. He raced to the pickup, jumped in, and lurched off, sending great arcs of mud spraying off to either side of the truck.

Ten minutes later he was back. Instructing Sarah and Jerry to keep up the stamping, he called Allen and me to help him unload a decrepit rowboat from the bed of the truck. Allen and I got the boat down the bank to the edge of the water. Leigh followed with the "gear"—one oar, a coffee can, a club, and two eight-foot redwood poles, each of which had a six-inch trident affixed to the narrow end.

"This looks exciting," I said to Allen.

"Exciting and illegal," said Leigh offhandedly as we put the boat in the water. "Not allowed to spear salmon in the river anymore. C'n do it in the ocean, but not up here. Didn't used to be that way." He seemed unconcerned with the unlawful aspect of our endeavor. I think that was because he did not believe there was anything immoral about what we were doing. Leigh is a true conservationist, a person who has ultimate respect for the balance of nature and the great chain of being. To him it must have been perfectly natural and fitting that he should be hunting salmon as they swam up his river.

Allen took one of the spears. Leigh handed me the lone oar and the coffee can. "I guess you're the poler," he said. "And the bailer... boat leaks." I tried to look enthusiastic.

We shoved off. I tried pushing off the bottom (the river was only three feet deep), and I tried paddling but quickly discovered I had very little control over where the boat went. Leigh and Allen, meanwhile, were making wild stabs at the passing fish. On one such uncontrolled attempt, Allen lost his balance and his spear, and were it not for a quick reaction on my part, would have followed the spear into the drink—all of which came perilously close to capsizing the boat.

For an hour or more, Leigh and Allen continued to spear the water, while Sarah and Jerry stood on the bank, stamping and shivering, calling out an occasional few words of encouragement. The rain steadily increased; I had to keep my shoulders hunched up so the water wouldn't run down my neck. I couldn't tell whether the water in the boat was coming from the rain or the river. I bailed and poled, my despair growing by the minute. Perhaps if I'd had a spear I could have gotten behind the program, but as it was, I was having no fun at all.

"It's getting dark," I blurted out, trying not to sound too eager. "Maybe

we should give up."

"Get us over to the bank," commanded Leigh. I breathed an inner sigh of relief and poled us to shore. Leigh jumped out. "Wait here. I'll get the flashlight," he said and scrambled up the bank. I couldn't believe it. He was going to get a flashlight! He limped over to the pickup and fished the thing out of the glove compartment. I turned to Allen, hoping to appeal to him, but when I saw his face I realized he was completely into it. These guys were both nuts. I watched Leigh as he hobbled back to the boat, and I thought, "Captain Ahab!"

He climbed back in and handed the flashlight to Allen. It was now pouring. "Try to shine the light in the fishes' eyes," he advised. Sure. Poling back out, I felt like crying.

I still didn't really believe we were going to go home with a salmon, and the first half-dozen passes with Allen wielding the flashlight and Leigh spearing did nothing to change my opinion. Then Leigh lunged forward with quickness remarkable in a near-sixty-year-old man, and it was immediately obvious that he'd hit one. Swiftly, he pulled his spear out of the river and there, impaled on the trident, was a 36-inch salmon, thrashing for its life. It was speared just below the gills. McCracken brought it up into the boat and, with a swift blow to the head, finished it.

I was speechless. "Let's go home," he said matter-of-factly. Again I poled us over to the bank. Up on the road, Jerry and Sarah were beside themselves with enthusiasm. As quickly as possible, we loaded the boat and the gear and all piled into the cab—Sarah on Allen's lap, Jerry on my lap, and the salmon on Jerry's lap.

Leigh slid the truck up the road. "Must be gettin' old," he mumbled. "Never used to take me that long to hit one." I realized that he had known all along he was going to get a fish. He was obviously feeling expansive. "Y' know," he continued, "that's one way the California Indians hunted salmon. There's a lot of ways to do things that people have forgotten about. Some of those old ways, they're just as good as the ways they do it now—maybe even better." He let that one sink in. Then he invited us to his house for dinner.

First we went back to the cabin and changed into dry clothes. When we got to Leigh's, he had already cleaned the salmon and sliced off a bunch of steaks. He put the steaks in to broil. Sarah made a salad. Leigh opened a bottle of wine and we toasted. The rain drummed on the roof and the fire sang. And oh my, but didn't that salmon taste good. ■