

**IMPRINT**

# Jim Harrison's Upper Peninsula

**By Jim Harrison**

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About 10 years ago, before we sold our farm in northern Michigan and moved to Montana, I was accustomed to driving the five hours north to a cabin we kept near Grand Marais on Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula. I made the drive countless times over the 25 years my wife, Linda, and I owned the log cabin that sat in the middle of 60 acres bisected by the Sucker River. If you'd been spending a month at a time in Hollywood, which I frequently was as a screenwriter in those years, there's nothing like returning to a farm with horses and chickens, and then on to a fairly remote cabin off a two-track road where when you try to sleep at night you hear a river flowing, probably the best sound on earth.

If you take out your Rand McNally you'll note that the Upper Peninsula is a long piece of land, over 300 miles, and thickish in places. It is about 30 percent of Michigan's land mass but contains only 3 percent of its population. Growing up in northern Michigan I was early on mystified by the Upper Peninsula even before I traveled there. In the 1960s I went up a number of times, and it did not cease to mystify me with its wildness. While camping I would study maps to try to figure out where I was other than within a cloud of mosquitoes and black flies, that irritating species that depends on clean water, of which there is a great deal in the U.P. There is little or no industry; therefore you could drink the water directly from Lake Superior — at least I always did on my long beach walks. There was a place near Grand Marais of nearly 60 miles of undisturbed beach, no people, no dwellings, just beach and water.

Louis Agassiz, the great Harvard zoologist, was also mystified by the Upper Peninsula during an expedition in the 1850s with the geologist and physician Douglass Houghton, the virtual father of the peninsula whose name is affixed to many Michigan features. Agassiz was stunned by the immensity of the virgin forests. When he got home to Cambridge, Mass., he shared his notes and conversation with his neighbor, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and thus we have that famed piece of doggerel, “Hiawatha,” that is exposed to every schoolchild, like it or not. I know Native Americans who think the poem is ludicrous, but then they are understandably touchy.

My first novel, “Wolf,” is set in the Huron Mountains west of Marquette, the largest city in the Upper Peninsula, and features a young man, lost in every respect including geographically. These aren’t mountains in the Western sense but a seemingly endless expanse of green hills. On my first trip there, camping and fishing with a friend, we were lost for two days though we never felt imperiled. We caught trout near a waterfall and slept wonderfully aided by a little booze and the thundering water. There are plenty of black bears around but of no concern as they go to great lengths to avoid you. There were a few wolves howling nearby when we were brook trout fishing in the gathering dark. We finally made it out of the Huron Mountains in my old Ford station wagon by fording a pond on top of a huge old beaver dam. I was quite happy to reach the civilization of a tavern.

As a child living in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula, I felt cheated with a winter of light snow. Light snowfalls rarely happen in the Upper Peninsula, which can get 300 inches a year along Superior, a preposterous amount. I loved visiting in the winter though I couldn’t reach my cabin because of the deep snow. These people have learned over the centuries how to deal with the vast accumulations of snow. I was never truly inconvenienced.

There is also a tradition in the Upper Peninsula that you never pass by anyone needing help. An Ojibwa Indian once towed me 60 miles after I broke a fan belt on Fourth of July weekend. He seemed startled that I couldn’t install a fan belt. A gas

station had a spare, which he installed. He wouldn't accept money so I stuffed a C note in his wife's pocket. She smiled, having more sense than he did. Where can you find someone to tow you 60 miles and install your fan belt? Only in the U.P.

Over the past two decades I have written a series of "Brown Dog" novellas that are being brought out late this year in a single volume by my publisher, Grove Press. Brown Dog is an itinerant worker and trout fisherman of mixed Chippewa-Finnish descent. Early on there was a true shortage of women in the Upper Peninsula, and many miners and loggers married Indian women. There are great numbers of both Finns and locals of Indian and Finnish heritage in the Upper Peninsula. The Finn migration came about because of the jobs in copper and iron mining and logging, and its terrain and water were a fine imitation of home in Finland. Brown Dog is mostly comic but he truly covers the waterfront, as they say. He has a passion for fishing and women and a little booze. He repairs deer cabins while he lives in them, often with a dog or several. He is even sexually excited about a rotund dentist while getting a tooth pulled.

One of the fans of Brown Dog is a feminist lawyer, which seemed unlikely but when I asked her why, she said it was because Brown Dog loved women with no "irony or backspin," often an affliction for sophisticated men. Brown Dog is jubilant about the great outdoors, doesn't have a Social Security card, and the only mail he ever gets is a driver's license renewal form. He is, generally speaking, unimpeded. I wanted to create a totally free man, which means he is poor but doesn't care.

About a decade ago, seeking some extra freedom of our own, my wife and I sold our farm in Michigan and moved to Montana to be close to our daughters and grandchildren. We've been coming to Montana ever since 1968 for its beauty and my fishing. Children often like to move eventually to where they had spent fine vacations.

If we didn't live in Montana we'd be living in or near Marquette, Mich., an interesting city of about 21,000 with a historic downtown district on the shore of Lake Superior. There is a fine harbor, and many sail their boats there in the summer. There is also reasonably good skiing and golf. And important for my

purpose there's a hotel of New York City standards called the Landmark Inn on a hill overlooking the harbor. The food is good, and you could stay in the Teddy Roosevelt Suite or, oddly enough, the Jim Harrison Suite. This is a case of local notoriety, as the Carlyle in New York City is without a Jim Harrison Suite though I stayed there many times even when I was not on book tours. I used to babysit for the dog owned by the queen of a small country taken over by the Soviets. (I must be discreet.) The dog was a barkless basenji that would only sit on the sofa and watch me write in my room at the Carlyle. It wouldn't accept a beer but liked the venison jerky I brought from home.

I would retreat occasionally to the Landmark Inn when the wildness of my log cabin, a couple of hours away, would wear me out. You can eat superb Lake Superior whitefish (it's the cold water) at the Landmark or the Vierling, a restaurant I would visit nearly every day. Another fascinating place to go is Sault Ste. Marie on the Canadian border, or the Soo as it is locally called, the home of the enormous Soo Locks. I would stay in the Ojibway Hotel in early December, then put on a coat and go outside when a big ship was coming through the locks, getting out of Superior before it froze. You can stand 20 feet away from the huge oceangoing ships, called "salties," hauling grain from Duluth and whatever else, headed to Europe.

A place worth visiting is the hilly Keweenaw Peninsula with its old mining towns dating from the years of the Copper Boom, in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Keweenaw is the northernmost part of the Upper Peninsula jutting north into Lake Superior. It is rugged and eerily beautiful and will remind you of English mining country in the towns of Hancock, Calumet and Laurium. My wife's relatives had a 500-pound copper nugget as part of their fireplace near Eagle Harbor. From Copper Harbor you can take a boat out to the Isle Royale National Park. Many people here migrated from Cornwall, England. Some people lived lavishly during the Copper Boom. The Italian tenor Enrico Caruso visited. My wife's grandparents had a house with 16 bedrooms, all with fireplaces. My father-in-law drove off to Dartmouth College in a Stutz with a buffalo robe.

Another good area to visit is Iron Mountain, a former mining town near the Pine Mountain Ski Jump, one of the highest artificially created ski jumps in the world. I used to hunt grouse near Iron Mountain because there are good Italian restaurants there like Fontana's Supper Club, built by early migrants, and after a long day of hunting rather than cooking slop in a cabin it was fun to eat a good Italian meal. It is little known but English setter bird dogs love the leftovers.

I almost forgot to mention the several fine waterfalls in the Upper Peninsula, much talked about and easy to find. There's the famed Tahquamenon Falls near Newberry and a smaller one near Munising, the home of the hero of my last novel, "The Great Leader." Brown Dog himself leaves the U.P. only a few times, to go to Hollywood to retrieve his stolen bear rug, to Montana to pick up a friend injured when he drunkenly ran his snowmobile into an ice fishing shanty and to Canada to hide out.

It's not easy to cheerlead for the Upper Peninsula now after the extractive logging and mining. That bleakness is now mostly overgrown by forests except for a few slag piles. But it is natural for a person to be biased about his home ground and even wish to share his enthusiasm. I'm also that way about the Sandhills of Nebraska, along with the U.P. another largely fine and unknown location.

***A correction was made on Dec. 8, 2013:*** An article last Sunday about the Upper Peninsula of Michigan misspelled the name of a restaurant in Marquette that the author visited often. It is Vierling, not Verling.

***A correction was made on Dec. 15, 2013:*** An article on Dec. 1 about the Upper Peninsula of Michigan misstated the state of mining there. There are indeed some mines operating in the area; they have not all been closed. The article also misstated the name of a hotel the author once visited in Sault Ste. Marie on the Canadian border. It is the Ojibway Hotel — not the Chippewa, which is on Mackinac Island.

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Jim Harrison is the author of over 35 books, including “Legends of the Fall,” “The Road Home,” “Dalva” and, published next month, “Brown Dog,” a collection of novellas.

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