



A.J. Kingsbury captured this scene of a special fish car unloading its cargo of fish fingerlings at the Antigo depot.

Northwoods sportsmen often took to the rails

By **JOE HERMOLIN**
Langlade County

Historical Society president

Antigo and the railroad have a long historic association, one that has been celebrated at the museum's Railroad Picnic for over 10 years. This year's picnic will be held on Wednesday, July 12 at the museum grounds, starting at 5 p.m.

Antigo, arguably, owes its very existence to the railroad. It might have remained a small village had Francis Deleglise not convinced the Milwaukee Lakeshore and Western Railroad to come through the Antigo area when it was expanding northward in the early 1880s. The Milwaukee Lakeshore and Western was later bought up by the Chicago and Northwestern which made Antigo headquarters of its Ashland division. Antigo quickly became a booming railroad town.

Before there were roads the rails brought people and freight in and out of the Wisconsin Northwoods. At their peak in 1917 railroads transported 77 percent of all freight and 98 percent of all passengers into and out of the Antigo region. It was a vital part of the timber harvesting industry that helped settle the Northwoods.

The museum in Antigo celebrates our railroad heritage, first by purchasing a caboose and then a steam locomotive which was restored and sits on the museum

grounds. It then established a small park with the locomotive and caboose as its focus.

A popular but often overlooked group of railroad patrons that passed through Antigo were sportsmen (and a few sports-women). With the opening of fishing season anglers would travel northwards from southern Wisconsin and Chicago to try their luck in northern Wisconsin's lakes. For some Antigo was a final destination but for many it was a stopping off point and a place to change trains to various destinations further north.

Today fishing is central to the northern Wisconsin tourism industry. Each year nearly two million people fish in Wisconsin's waterways. They catch about 72 million fish of various species. For some the start of fishing season is anticipated with an eagerness surpassed only by the start of gun deer season and Christmas. It has long been so.

In the late 19th century, logging interests expanded the network of railroads into northern Wisconsin. A side effect was that ease of access to isolated areas quickly led to construction of lodges accommodating sportsmen. Resorts began as early as the 1880s on the shores of Lac Vieux Desert. Other resorts soon followed including those run by Seth Conover and O. W. Sayner who now have towns named for them. At the time roads were poor

or nonexistent and the railroad was the way to reach these resorts.

The Chicago & Northwestern ran "fishermen specials" out of Chicago. From 1917 to 1950 it operated special trains to Lake Gogebic in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where it operated its own resort, and to Cisco Lake and Woodruff. From May 1 until Memorial Day and again from Labor Day until October 1 these trains ran only on weekends. From Memorial Day to Labor Day they operated daily except Mondays. Most trains left Chicago in early evening and arrived at the lakes by early morning. The "fish runs" generally consisted of a baggage car, two coaches, and four to six sleeping cars.

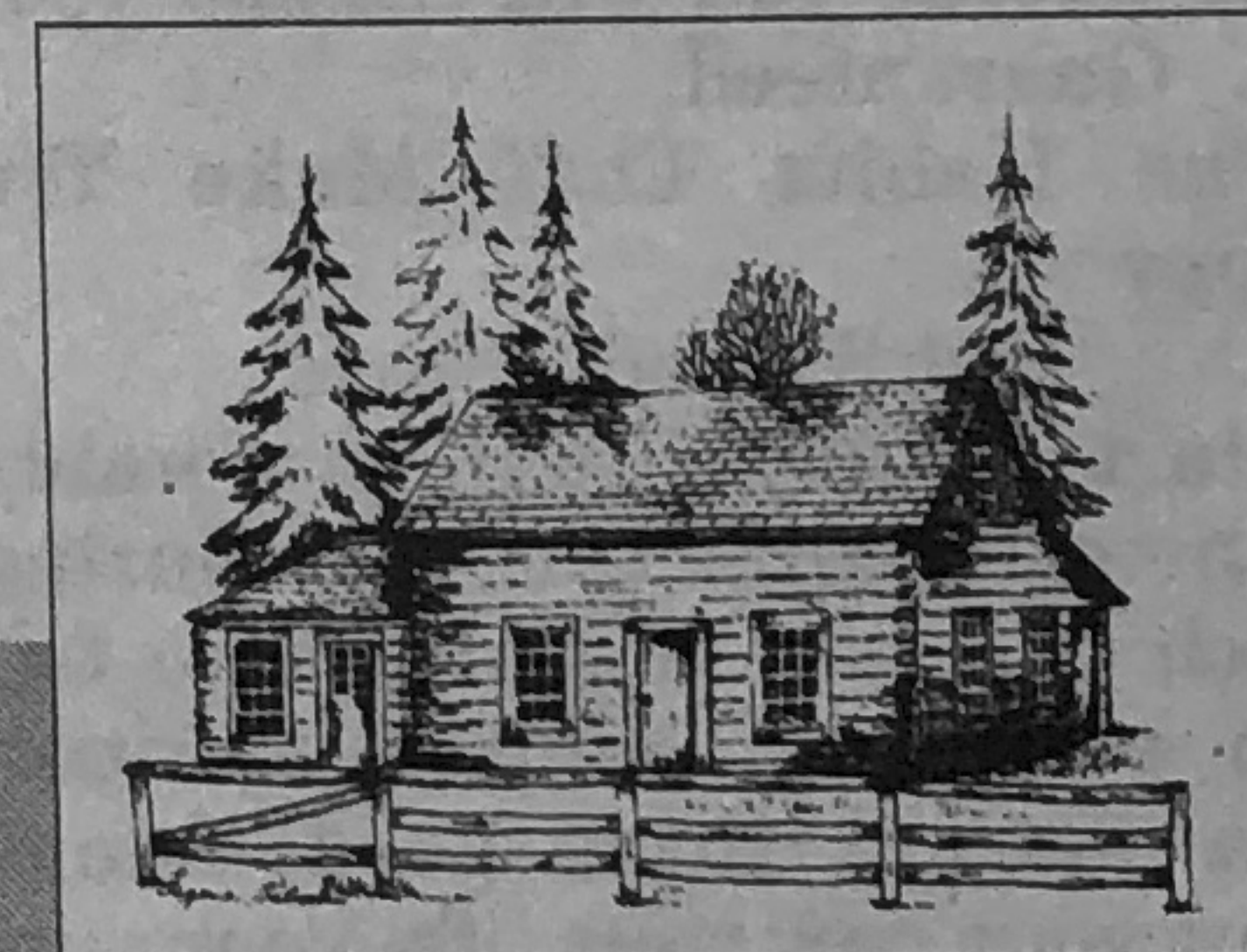
As the popularity of the fish runs increased the Chicago and Northwestern would run one large train into Antigo where it would then be divided into two: one going through Rhinelander then on to Ironwood and the other going to Watersmeet. Each engine had its own insignia at the front: the Watersmeet line a muskie and the Ironwood line an eagle. Trains brought fishermen north and took them home with a special section in baggage for trophy fish.

General passenger travel by rail began to decline in the 1960s and 1970s although there was still a significant amount of freight moving through Antigo. Plans continued to phase out rail travel, pas-

senger service, and "fish runs" in particular. The "fish run" had one last hurrah in 1981 when a sportsmen's group brought a private coach into Antigo attached to the rear of a freight train. It left Antigo on Thursday, July 9 with a group of fishermen, headed for Spider Lake near Mercer, and returned the following Tuesday. It was the last of the "fish runs" and in fact the last passenger train to leave the Antigo depot.

It was not only fishermen who traveled to northern Wisconsin lakes. Sometimes the fish themselves rode the rails. With rail being the most efficient mode of travel, specially designed fish cars

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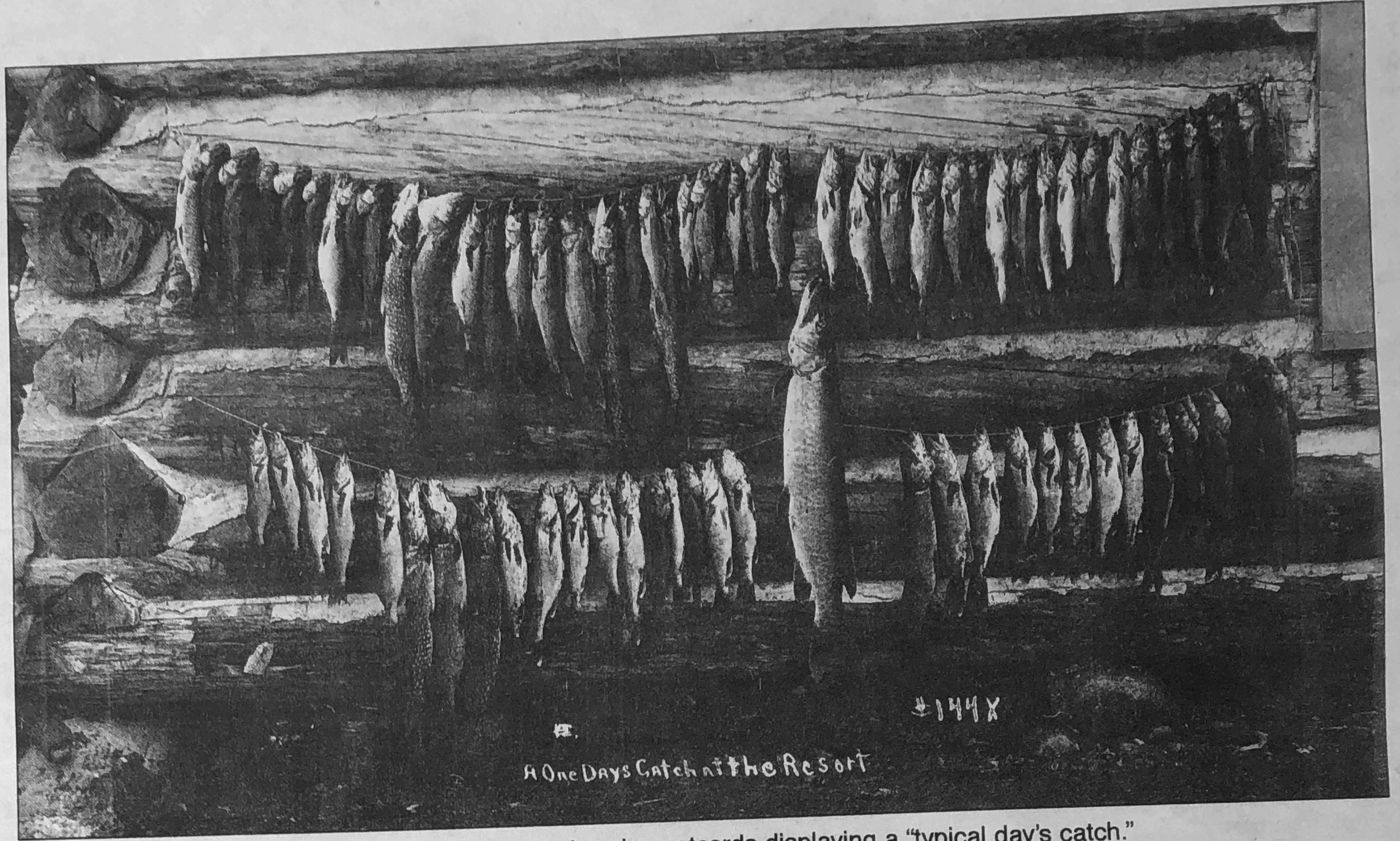
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were coupled to passenger trains for a ride north from Madison, bringing fish fingerlings from hatcheries to where people were beginning to settle in villages and on farms. Many of these north-bound rail cars did not make it all the way to well-known fishing camps. Instead fish fingerlings came to Antigo as well as other sites where they were transferred onto trucks and taken to stock local lakes. These fish travelled in style.

The federal government built 10 such cars, with Wisconsin having two of them. The Badger #1, built by the Litchfield Car Company in 1893, was approximately 55 feet long. In 1912 it was replaced by the Badger #2, built by the Pullman Company. It was larger and sturdier and remained in service through the 1940s. The Badger #2 was a special wooden car with a steel underframe fitted with steel tanks to bring the fingerlings and their accompanying caretakers to the Northwoods. The interior was lined with aquaria, each with an aeration system making the car considerably heavier than a standard passenger car. (The Badger



Lodges promoted themselves in postcards displaying a "typical day's catch."

#2 has been restored and may be seen at the Mid-Continent Railroad Museum in North Freedom. It is the last remaining fish car in the U.S.)

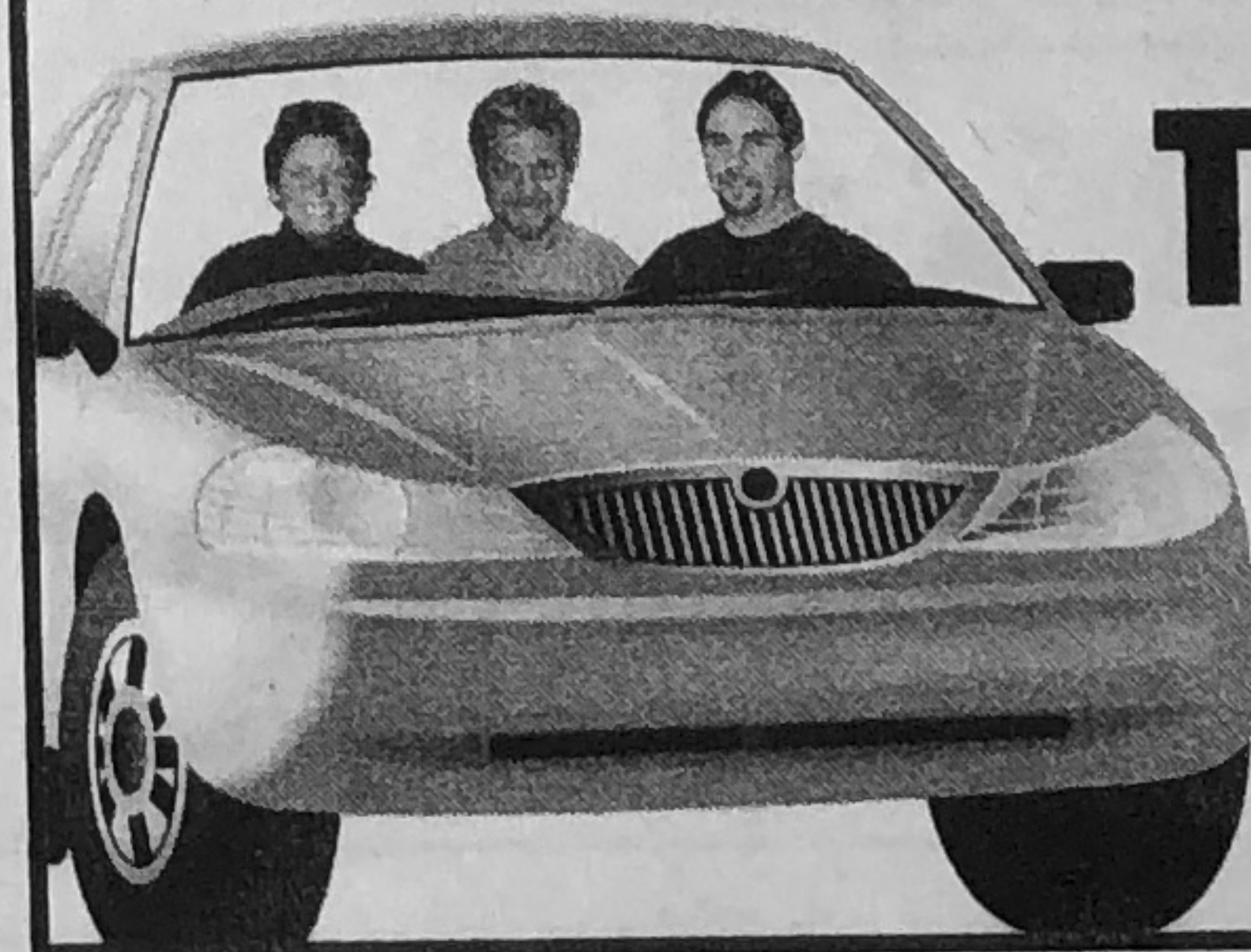
Now that fishing is on many people's thoughts it is worth recalling the days when the railroad played a major role in getting the people to the fish, and often the

fish to the people. The railroad also catered to other sportsmen by running hunters' specials to the Northwoods but that is a story for the fall.



Many Ojibwe men, and some women, hired out as fishing guides. A knowledgeable guide who developed a reputation for knowing the good spots could earn a lot.

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