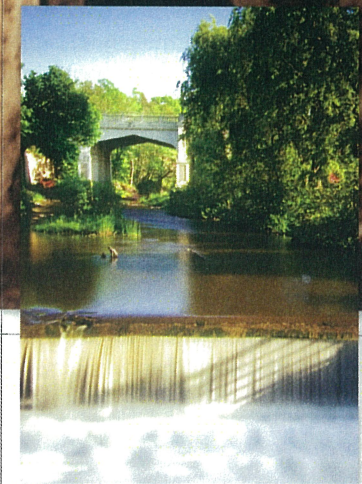




From left: James McCullough, Tim Tebeau, Jerry Dennis, Keith Taylor.
Inset: The Bear River in Petoskey.





RIVER *of* WORDS

On the shores of Hemingway's boyhood waters, The Bear River Writers' Conference has risen to national prominence within just 10 years. Here, insider Tim Tebeau shares moments weird and wonderful.

PORTRAITS *by* TODD ZAWISTOWSKI

When I wake to the creak of cabin doors, the squelch of shoes on dew-drenched grass and the sight of sleepy literati ambling along the edge of Walloon Lake toward wafting coffee and the promise of words, I know I am at the Bear River Writers' Conference. For me, the conference and this set of impressions has been a rite of June for the past 11 years. I have gone from gangly beginnings as a young undergraduate schlepping copies and chauffeuring poet laureates to serving as associate director. It has been a rare gift to grow up alongside the Bear River Writers' Conference.

Flanked by century-old summer cottages on Walloon's western shore and, more important, echoes of Hemingway, Camp Michigania makes the ideal setting to inspire writers' dreams—dreams nourished by a faculty of renowned poets, novelists, essayists and publishers from around the world. Graduate students carve out their voices; professional journalists and writing instructors seek fresh perspective, and older writers catalog a lifetime of memories. Attendees hail from such disparate places as Wisconsin and West Africa, but they all find inspiration here on Walloon—the headwaters of the Bear River—and among the hills, valleys and Great Lakes shores nearby. They rejoin the world knowing the names of our lakes, rivers and roads, colonizing the imaginations of their readers with the colors of our sunsets and the quiet we would not trade for anything.

The Bear River Writers' Conference began, as many things do Up North, with an invocation of trout fishing, that lonely and methodical obsession that comes naturally to many writers. Poet Richard Tillinghast, a prof at the University of Michigan, was performing a reading at Petoskey's North Central Michigan College,

and one of his selections explored fly fishing and peyote in the High Sierras. Afterward, James McCullough, himself a fly fisherman, writer and teacher, introduced himself. The two exchanged fish stories, and somehow the dialog evolved into a vision of creating a gathering of writers amid the nature of Northern Michigan.

Tillinghast, McCullough and fellow NCMC professor David Payne initially launched the Writing Alliance, a nonprofit organization that relentlessly scrounged for seed money from community foundations, arts organizations and private donors to realize their vision in June of 2001.

Camp Daggett, a longtime children's summer camp at the tip of Walloon's West Arm, hosted the first Bear River Writers' Conference. Attendees suffered for the sake of art as 50 adults aged 19 to 90 folded themselves like human origami into unheated barracks and iron bunk beds designed for 8-year-olds. Still, despite the improvisations and scrunched, cold sleeping conditions, the palpable genesis of a great tradition ran strong.

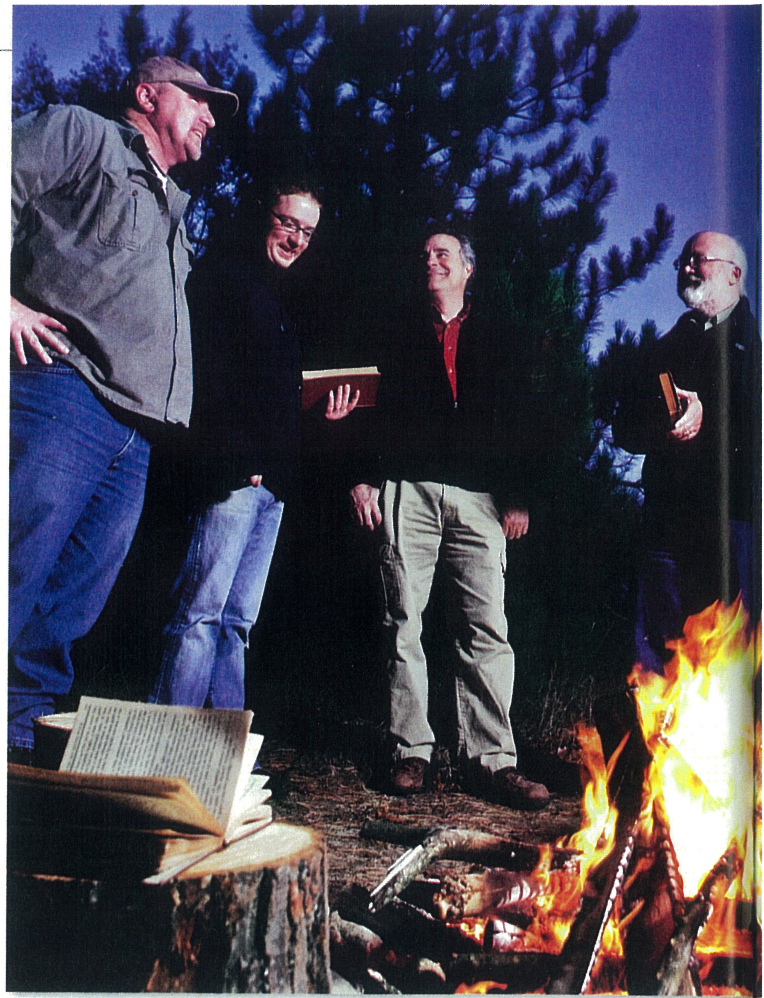
McCullough, Tillinghast and the faculty created an environment safe for creative expression, and connections quickly formed. Former United States Poet Laureate Robert Hass played basketball with a pair of Wayne State undergraduates who had leveraged their every scrap of loose change to meet their idol. College freshmen critiqued the confessions of middle-aged mothers. A pair of divorcees wrote love poems to each other (they are now married), and a suburban housewife liberated from routine and inhibition read an adeptly mixed metaphor of fly fishing and sex to an awed audience.

One year, Motor City poet M.L. Liebler and the Magic Poetry Band taught a two-day poetry and jazz workshop and performed at an open-to-the-public event the conference presents each year. A packed house of gingham-clad resorters and polite Petoskey patrons of the arts laughed at the essays of Thomas Lynch and relaxed into cerebral quietude with the Zen-like poems of Robert Hass. But then, following a wine and cheese reception, the crowd's calm was ripped apart by the Magic Poetry Band performing crushingly loud covers of tunes by Iggy Pop and The Rolling Stones, Liebler's long snow-white goatee whipping back and forth in rock-and-roll exultation. These early, intermittent shocks of the unplanned helped to galvanize a sense of humor and self-reliance, in keeping with the spirit of the North itself.

Facing a scarcity of donor dollars in the economic downturn following 9/11, the Bear River Conference found a new home at the University of Michigan's Department of English in the college of Literature, Science and Arts. There, under the direction of Michigan poet Keith Taylor and with generous support from the Meijer family, it now has the manpower it needs to run as a nationally renowned gathering of writers.

Teaching writers to write more and write better could be accomplished anywhere, but the specific vision for Bear River is a writing experience rooted in the natural world here in Northwest Michigan. Those of us who live our lives in proximity to woods and waters have assimilated them into our perspective and can forget the liberating—or sometimes terrifying—effect they can have on visitors.

At the second Bear River Conference, I waited at the registration desk until 11 p.m. to greet a late-arriving writer from the Chicago suburbs. She arrived shaking and hyperventilating, completely



unnerved by the foreign experience of avoiding deer while driving on dirt roads in complete darkness. She returned to Chicago the next morning. Another year, a hulking, dread-locked grad student from Queens asked me for an auxiliary flashlight to ease his fears of a world without perpetual neon.

In 2009, while driving through a four-mile stretch of unbroken pine forest en route from the Pellston airport, a young Latina student from the Bronx who had never left New York City told me in a quavering voice, "I've never seen so many trees. We could die here and no one would ever know." I assured her that we would not die. Four days later she stood in front of a hundred of her writing peers and read a reverent and masterful essay about learning the vocabulary of nature and how she would return to New York reciting the names of birds and wildflowers.

Besides its advocacy of reverence for the natural world, reaching out to writers at all levels of experience has shaped and defined the Bear River project. For eight years, through grants from U of M's Rackham School of Graduate Studies the conference funded scholarships for at-risk high school students from the Lighthouse School on Beaver Island, some of whom, by age 18, had lived a multitude of tragic lifetimes and were given a safe space to put them into words.

The Indigenous Voices project brought native students to Bear River and created the space for a cultural exchange whereby 30-some Odawa crossed Walloon Lake in the jimaan, their enormous tribal canoe, and shared lunch and traditional storytelling with the Bear River writers. That was sponsored by a partner-

BE A PART *of the* BEAR RIVER WRITERS' CONFERENCE

Find your voice in Hemingway Country at the Bear River Writers' Conference. BRWC 2012 will run from Thursday, May 31st to Monday, June 4th at Camp Michigania on Walloon Lake. Workshops fill up fast and the conference is typically sold out by March so early registration is encouraged. Packages run from \$600 to \$800 depending on lodging options. For more information lsa.umich.edu/bearriver, bearriver@umich.edu or, 734.764.4139.

ship with the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians and University of Michigan's Arts of Citizenship program. Other scholarships bring in young slam poets from Ann Arbor and urban students from the City College of New York, all unified by the desire to write amid the experience of Northwest Michigan.

With an emphasis on Michigan-based writers, the list of faculty that have taught at Bear River reads like an all-star list of contemporary literature: former United States Poet Laureates Robert Hass and Donald Hall, poets Anne Carson, Linda Gregerson and Bob Hicok, National Book Award winner Thomas Lynch, novelists Charles Baxter and Bret Lott, essayist Philip Lopate, and Northern Michigan's own Jerry Dennis among others. Each has left a mark not only on the conference, but also on Walloon Lake itself, whether it was Anne Carson swimming sleek laps in the cold, still morning or Jerry Dennis fly-casting for smallmouth bass along the timber-strewn shoreline.

The legacy of Hemingway looms too large to be ignored over this lake and over all the words written here at Walloon's edge. Pontoon boat flotillas carry participants past the Windermere cottage, where the fabled author spent his childhood summers. Hemingway's nephew, Ernest Mainland, and his wife, Judy, current residents of the ancestral cottage, have hosted a series of luncheons for the Bear River writing faculty. Mainland himself is an animated and expansive character, greeting his guests in colorful tartan golf trousers and booming ordinance from a small cannon installed on his boat dock. I will never forget a spirited telling of the history of the Hemingway outhouse, crudely marked with a painted sign reading 'Hemingway sat here.'

Heading into its 11th year, the Bear River Writers' Conference is a well-oiled engine of creative exchange. Each morning begins with a bleary amble to breakfast. As students and faculty move into a state of collective wakefulness there is a palpable building of excitement among the hundred or so writers gathered here as they divide into workshop groups and spend the next three hours discussing craft and picking apart the lines of last night's writing in guided critique sessions. There is no laborious poring over old manuscripts, as this conference is unique in its emphasis on fresh work created on the spot.

During the June afternoons, writers gather for craft talks, attend publishing panels or scatter across the green hillsides or near the water's edge of the Camp Michigania property reading, contemplating or scribbling furiously in their notebooks. Some just languidly paddle the azure expanse of Walloon Lake in kayaks. After the evening meal, the entire group convenes for a cocktail reception and faculty reading before dispersing to collapse with creative exhaustion, chase phrases into the thin hours of night or unwind around a beach bonfire.

No one really expects an enclave of writers to maintain 10 years of good behavior. Good writing requires risk and loss of inhibition, and I would be remiss to deliver only the lacquered, wholesome version of our decade of scribbling on the shores of Walloon. Unlikely ephemeral love affairs sometimes flourish, betrayed by the imprint of bodies in beach sand or confessed in newly crafted lines read by the fire. There was the founding of the unofficial Bear River swim team, brought on by the courage and euphoria found in fireside confessions and a few bottles of wine. Writers en masse, some young, some old, one blind, took to the frigid waters of Walloon under a bright fabric of stars while their clothes waited on the shore. This community nurtures creative spirit while nudging its participants outside their boundaries, and this journey will likely require many more years of red wine and naked swims.

As each Bear River Writers' Conference winds down from its last workshop, writers cap their pens, power down their laptops, and prepare for the culminating reading in which they project their own voices onto Bear River and read to the entire group. Locked in the role of perennial emcee, I am struck by what can be accomplished in a few short days, the epiphanic clarity and power that can be distilled from a weekend immersed in writing and immersed in Northern Michigan. Some writers approach the microphone with shaking hands and cracking voices, some burst into tears or raise the collective pulse with lines of innuendo, but nearly all harness an image or emotion taken from their experience on Walloon Lake.

In 2008, during the afternoon session of readings, Jaime Courtney, a retired newspaper journalist and poet in her 70's, confessed to the crowd that the experience of living a few days in a colony of writers had changed her life and given her new access to her creative spirit. Reading from a poem in progress, "The Fiddler of Kumsong," about soldiers anticipating death, she collapsed with a fatal brain aneurysm. While shocked and saddened by the gravity of what we had witnessed, there was satisfaction knowing that someone who had given her life to words was able to end with fresh and passionate ones.

As camp breaks on the final morning the writers travel back to their lives, and I travel back to mine knowing that for the next 12 months Bear River will be a living diaspora out there in the literary world. Memories of Walloon Lake will insinuate themselves into poems, novels, essays and conversations all over the world. A hundred or so people will rejoin the legions of everyday life with an ecstatic creative hangover. It happens as it does here in Northern Michigan, and luckily I live just up the road. ■

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