

To build a fire.

I know this story was written by Jack London, but I lived it, with a different ending. It was a particularly cold day during our two-week Christmas vacation. The morning chores were done, and calf pens were cleaned last week. This a perfect for me to go hunting along the Mississippi islands. The temperature was well below zero; the windchill was extreme. I just loved that.

I felt like I had the whole outside world to myself.

The islands were a mile east of our farm.

I walked the tree lines and wooded patches until I reached the Big Island.

A rabbit scampered away from me in that zigzag way peculiar to cotton tails.

I shot it with the 20-gauge shotgun I was carrying.

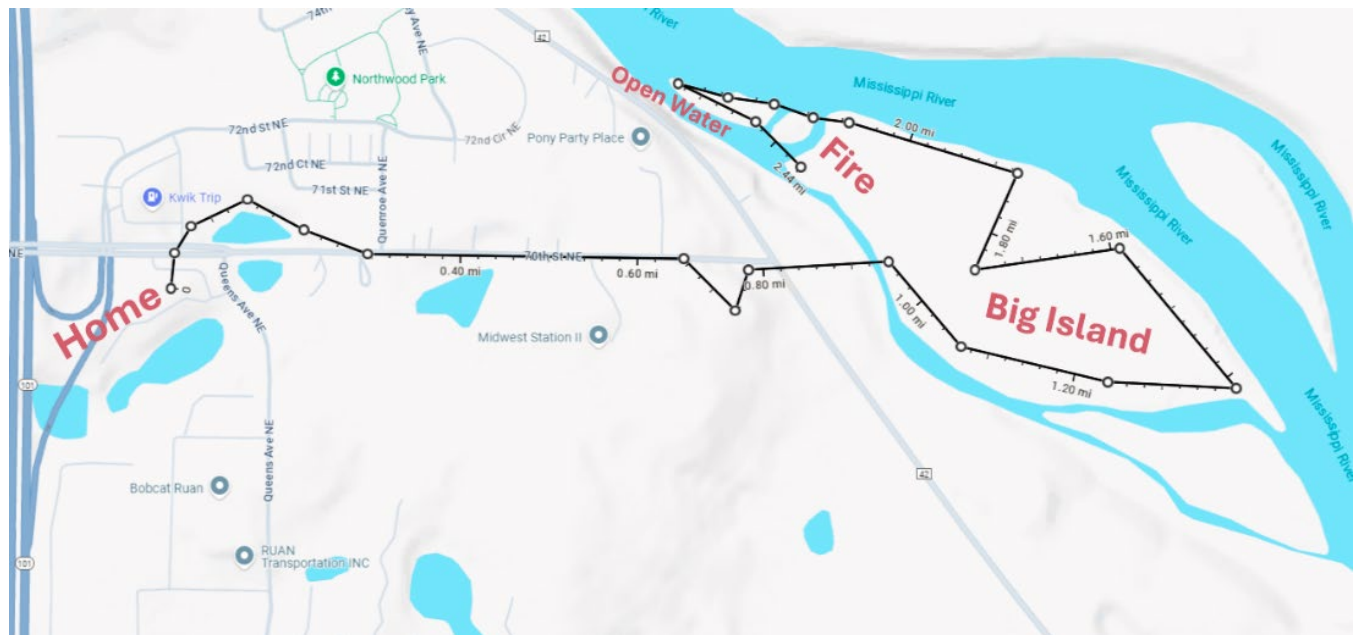
Later, I shot a big Fox Squirrel, but he would was an old buck and too tough to cook in the woods. I planned to build a fire on the Big Island and cook the rabbit for lunch.

When I reached the islands, I hunted the wooded interior to avoid the wind.

I hadn't dressed too heavy because I did not want to get sweaty walking through the snow.

I spent a couple of hours hunting the islands.

My luck was better than I expected, given the low temperature.



A second rabbit popped up near the slope that the Bouley family dumped their trash on. Their farmstead was just up the hill.

Every farm had a gully, slope, or hidden place to dump trash in those days.

There was no garbage pick-up service.

Fortunately, all those private dumps were cleaned up in later decades.

For some reason bunnies liked to hang around dumps.

Maybe the cans and old metal stuff were good hiding from foxes and raptors.

I decided to explore the farthest upstream island, the one called Arrow Island because of its shape.

The wind was harsh on the exposed skin of my face, so I snuggled up my clothes to cover everything but my eyeballs.

That limited my vision.

At the same time, I was walking over big ice chunks that had been piled by the river as it froze, weeks ago.

At the very point of the island, I tripped and slipped. I was not hurt, but I cracked through ice and to my great surprise my right leg was soaked and my boot was full of ice-cold water.

Now I was cold.

I immediately decided to make a fire in the next suitable spot.

I had a half book of matches in my shirt pocket.

I worked my way to Big Island and found a place with minimum wind.

Maybe I could have searched more carefully but I already had whole body shakes.

I prepared for a fire and quickly went through most of the matches in the book before I realized this wasn't going to be easy.

The kindling was not dry enough.

Whenever I got a small flame going, a gust of wind would sneak through and blow it out.

My fingers were now stiff, plus I had the shakes.

Finally, I was down to my last match.

I carefully shredded the book to make a tiny pile of dry kindling.

I made a small ridge of snow for a wind break.

I got a fire going with that last match.

I am stoic naturally, but even now, after more than sixty-five years, I feel a rush from the heat of that fire. Tom.

