

Discovering the Kinni

Rob Oden

Moving around the country, as I've done, in several academic positions, I take care to read as much as I can about the trout streams in the areas to which I'm moving. When my wife and I knew we were moving to Northfield, Minnesota, I did not need to do much reading. I'd fished the Driftless Zone briefly years ago, and I'd read lots of articles and chapters in books on trout fishing in Minnesota and Wisconsin. It all sounded pretty good, but I thought I knew better: writers about fishing, like those of us who fish, tend to exaggerate. Very few 18" browns really are a foot and a half long, and very few waters fish as well as advertised.

In the case of the Kinni, I was both right and wrong. I was right that the fishing was not as advertised. I was wrong, however, directionally: the fishing was *better* than proclaimed. First time I fished the Kinni – the first time – I came home and said to my wife, Teresa: "I've fly-fished since about the time I could walk; I've fished across the country and partially across the globe; the uncle who taught me how to fish told me, when I was thirteen years old, that I'd now fished every significant drainage in Montana, Alberta, and British Columbia; but, I think I love the Kinni most."

What is it about this river that prompts such immediate and lasting love – not just admiration and affection, but love? It's the country through which the Kinni flows, both the rolling Wisconsin farm land of the upper river and the almost spookily isolated gorge. It's the however-many-there-are-today wild browns per stream mile, with the occasional native fish in the upper reaches. It's the size of the Kinni, big enough to hold surprises, but small enough to be manageable and approachable and companionable. It's those regular hatches: I've fished the Battenkill for decades, and I've almost never seen the reputed Hendrickson hatch, nor have I seen many Hexes in Michigan; but the Blue Winged Olives and other mayflies are there on the Kinni when they are supposed to be. It's running into folks like Dave Norling and his dog – the former fishing, always, cane, and gathering morels whenever he spots a dead elm.

Maybe it's this last observation that is the key: I love the Kinni because so many others I respect love the river. But love, like everything that matters most in life, is ephemeral. While time there is, we have, all of us who love the Kinni, to give and do all we can for this beautiful, haunting little river.

Rob Oden grew up in South Dakota, from which he fished the western half of the country; he went to college in New England, then taught Near Eastern religions and languages at Dartmouth College for fifteen years, has now served as a college president for nearly two decades, and is currently president of Carleton College.



Carleton President Oden (right) teaches a fly fishing class to students.
Photo courtesy of Carleton College.