

The Incomplete Angler

I am looking at a 1969 photograph of myself at three years old, standing on a wet sidewalk outside somebody's house, poking at a nice catch of fish. I count twenty-two bass in the photo. I don't recognise the house or remember the occasion, but my memories of fishing go back nearly that far. I can recall digging up my mother's flower beds at our house on Slayton Settlement Road at four years old, looking for worms to use as bait.

Fishing was a large part of my boyhood. My father had quite a collection of rods and reels, waders, nets, and tackle boxes crammed full of hooks, spools of monofilament line, split-shot sinkers, bobbers, and other paraphernalia. When I was still quite young he took my sister and I on fishing trips to a branch of the Eighteen-Mile Creek off Quaker Road near Gasport. This area is now part of the sprawling Becker Farms, but in the early 1970s it was just a quiet, tree-shaded stream winding through a cow pasture. In fact I think I was more interested in watching the cows than I was in fishing.

Along the way we always stopped to take a look at the waterfall and castle-like ruins of the Mabee mill at the intersection of Quaker and Slayton Settlement roads. There was a nice parking area to sit and look at the waterfall. I remember tossing bread crumbs to the geese and ducks in the mill pond above the falls. There was nothing at the time to hinder us from freely exploring around the waterfall and the ruins of the Mabee mill. Today both areas are off limits: locked away behind chain-link fences and a formidable array of Posted signs.

On a local fishing outing during those early years my father stopped at a bait and tackle shop and bought my sister and I a couple of long old-fashioned cane poles. With a length of line, a hook and a bobber, we were all set. I don't remember that my sister was overly enthusiastic about fishing, but I caught many a bluegill and sunfish with that cane pole before it finally splintered and broke.

I recall another day when I was fishing with my father and a couple of uncles along the Erie Canal next to a bridge. A fellow angler, a stranger to us, had staked out a good spot for himself beneath the bridge. When a Game Warden came along to check everybody's fishing license, the man and his tackle silently disappeared up into the shadows of the bridge girders. After the officer left he casually eased himself back down and resumed fishing.

We made a trip once up to the St. Lawrence River for the spring perch run. My sister and I, our father, Uncle Gary, and Cousin Rick all crammed into our yellow station wagon for the long drive. Rick slept the entire way up, sprawled across the middle of the back seat and leaving my sister and I squashed against each door.

The perch fishing was fast and exciting. We tied two hooks to our lines, and I think the men were working two fishing rods each. The fish were biting so eagerly that we often pulled in double catches. After just a few hours of non-stop action we had filled our buckets and were ready to head home.

But Cousin Rick didn't want to leave. While the rest of us packed our gear into the car, he sulked next to the river, stubbornly refusing to pull his lines out of the water. He pointedly ignored my father's

repeated shouts of “Come on, Rick! It’s time to go!” Uncle Gary was a big bear of a man, and his scant reserve of patience soon ran out; he marched back down to the river and practically hauled the boy up to the car by the scruff of his neck.

Back home in Appleton I made many fishing excursions of my own. I often walked down the dusty lane to a farm pond across the road. It was connected to the east branch of Keg Creek and was good for an afternoon of angling for sunfish and the occasional black bass. If the fish weren’t biting I occupied my time dabbling in the creek, attempting to catch minnows and crayfish by hand.

The main branch of Keg Creek north of Lake Road was my primary fishing destination. On Saturdays I bicycled down Hess Road, steering with one hand and hanging on to a rod and tackle box with the other. I prowled the creek bank from the deep basin by the road all the way to the swamp near the lake.

About midway between the road and the lake a plank and cable bridge had been built across the creek. The bridge didn’t lead anywhere, but it was a good spot to cast from. I once saw a huge Northern Pike glide beneath the bridge, and spent a fruitless hour trying to entice him with a series of lures before he shot away downstream with a mighty surge of power.

Just north of the cable bridge there was a nice deep hole in the shade beneath some overhanging pine trees where lunker bass and trout were rumored to lurk. I cast many a line under those trees, and every now and then I was rewarded with a strike.

I never targeted any particular fish; whatever I could catch was fine with me. Sometimes I didn’t even know what I had caught. I was fishing with the Hapless Boy once and reeled in an unidentifiable fish.

“What the heck is it?”

“I dunno. Might be a salmon.”

“What kind though?”

“I dunno. What kind of salmon live around here?”

“I dunno. Maybe it’s a brown trout.”

“It isn’t brown though. It’s pretty shiny. Maybe it’s a rainbow trout.”

We took the fish along the path to where a veteran angler was casting his line, hoping he could enlighten us.

“That’s a sheephead, boy.”

“Is it? Oh. Okay then, thanks.”

“What did he say it was?”

“A sheephead.”

“What’s a sheephead?”

“I dunno.”

There were often other people fishing along the creek, and they sometimes offered an entertaining diversion when the fishing was slow. One sunny afternoon I was hunkered down next to the creek-bank with my rod and tackle box when I saw a group of figures coming up the path from the lake. When they

got close I saw that it was my former Cub Scout den mother and a few kids, including her son who was about my age. They didn't recognise me as they walked past, but a few yards further along the path they stopped and I heard the following exchange between mother and son:

“Wait a second. Where is your fishing pole?”

He looked at her blankly. “Huh?”

“Your fishing pole! Why aren't you carrying your fishing pole?”

He glanced helplessly around his feet for a second. “I don't know, I dropped it.”

“Dropped it! Well, for Heaven's sake, where?”

The boy pointed vaguely back towards the lake. “I don't know, back there somewhere.”

His mother stared at him. “Well, for Heaven's sake, go get it! We're going home now!”

While she and the other kids continued on, the boy plodded dolefully back past me. I watched him in the distance, going back and forth, swishing his arms through the weeds and cattails in search of his fishing rod. Eventually he came trudging back along the path, clutching the rod in one hand, shoulders slumped and face downcast, the very picture of despondency.

And there was the time a couple of young men were highly excited about catching a large red carp. One of them pranced up and down the path, showing off the fish and asking everybody he met:

“Hey, you wanna buy a carp? Lookit the size of this thing! You wanna buy it? You wanna buy a carp?”

I think my favorite memory of Keg Creek is from a day when I had the creek all to myself. Well, almost. I was slowly fishing my way downstream, flipping a new lure into the water, retrieving it, then walking on a few more steps. A movement caught my eye, and I looked across the stream to see a tiny yellow and black duckling bobbing in the water, keeping pace with me. He was slipping in and out of the cattails that lined the opposite side of the creek, not overly nervous but clearly hoping to escape my attention.

So I played along, and pretended not to notice him as he continued paddling downstream just abreast of me. We accompanied each other for quite a while, each keeping one eye on the other, until finally I stopped and gave him a chance to unobtrusively vanish into the cattails. The image has stayed with me ever since: the slow-moving stream and the tiny duckling.

My father was strictly a bait fisherman, but for a few years I fancied myself a lure connoisseur. I didn't own very many, but I pored over the ads in each new issue of *Fur-Fish-Game Magazine*, coveting the latest Rapalas, Dardevles, and Mepps spinners. On shopping trips to Lockport department stores I usually ended up in the fishing section, gazing at the displays of lures that I didn't have any money to buy. I compensated by ransacking my mother's craft supplies and constructing my own spinner lures out of shiny beads and baubles. I never caught anything with them, but it was fun putting them together.

I used whatever fishing rod was handy from my father's stock: generally an assortment of Zebco spin-cast and spinning combos. It made little difference to me. Eventually I received my own spinning reel and rod as a Christmas present. I continued using that rod even after it broke in half—I just kept

wrapping electrical tape around it to keep it together. Although my father owned a fly fishing rod and reel, I have no memory of him ever using them. The exotic art of fly fishing has remained an unexplored world to me.

One summer I went on a canoeing and hiking trip to the Adirondack Mountains with a church group. We did a lot of fishing from our canoes and one lucky day I caught two huge smallmouth bass. All the boys in our group gathered round, wide-eyed with envy and plying me with questions. I showed them the lure I used; I didn't actually know what it was so I just called it a "bass plug." Everybody took a good look at it, then dove into their own tackle boxes, digging through their lure collections in the hopes of finding something similar.

Enough water has flowed down the stream since that trip, some forty plus years of it, that I can now safely confess that my lucky "bass plug" wasn't really mine. I had borrowed it from Cousin Butch's tackle box one day when he wasn't looking; and I liked it so much I conveniently forgot to ever return it.

My neighbor Jonathan was an avid angler. He was about ten years older than me, and he often took some of us local boys on fishing outings. I remember bass fishing with him one day at a pond off of Lower Lake Road. I had a rather hefty lead sinker tied to my line, and when I cast it out into the middle of the pond it made a tremendous splash. By coincidence a bass jumped at the same time. The combined splashes alarmed Jonathan.

"Was that your sinker or a fish?" he called from across the pond.

"Both!" I hollered back. "I figure if I can't hook one, I'll just brain 'em and let 'em float ashore."

We also drove down to Allegany State Park to fish for bass and trout at Red House and Quaker lakes. I recall a rainy day of fishing at the base of the Red House dam. A boy who was part of our group was rooting around near the water's edge and caught a couple of red-spotted newts. I was fascinated with these creatures and wanted to take one home as a pet, but to my horror he took them up to the lake and used them as bait.

Later that year when school started one of my classmates brought in a coffee can containing two of those red-spotted newts. It seemed his family owned a cabin in the Allegany area and he caught them on a weekend trip. I eagerly offered to buy one of the bright orange creatures. We struck a deal and a couple of dollars changed hands.

I took the can home with me, put my newly-purchased newt in a glass bowl, and returned the other one the next day. I was now the proud owner my very own red-spotted newt (or "eft" as it is properly called). I kept it until the following summer, when it escaped from the glass bowl and was never seen again.

Nearly all of my fishing was done along streams, ponds and small lakes. The only time I ever went fishing out on Lake Ontario was in the summer before my Senior year of high school. My sister's boyfriend had a boat, so early one morning we motored out from Olcott harbor. It was a chilly morning and he had the throttle wide open. The small boat smacked over the short choppy waves, sending cold

spray over the prow, while I huddled in the bottom with chattering teeth.

We powered out until the shore was just a dark line on the horizon. We were fishing for salmon, and I had no idea what I was doing. But I was given a quick lesson on lake fishing, and to my own surprise I caught one. I don't remember now if it was a Chinook or Coho salmon, but it was the biggest fish I've ever reeled in.

Afterwards we went trolling up the Eighteen-Mile Creek. By now the sun was high overhead and simply beating down on us. The boat pattered upstream at a glacial speed, and I was now sweating buckets and squinting in the glare off the water. I don't believe we caught anything, and by that time I didn't care: I just wanted to get out of the sun and out of the boat.

In general I did enjoy fishing very much, though I never had much skill at it. Often enough I hooked myself instead of the fish, tangled my line in every tree and bush, and snagged my latest brand-new lure on the only submerged log within miles. I would practice my casting in our back yard, and test the action of new lures in our swimming pool. One quirk I had was that I fished left-handed. This meant I held the rod upside-down, according to some people who tried to correct me.

“You're holding it wrong.”

“This is how I hold it.”

“Yeah, but it's wrong.”

I think my favorite fishing memories are of the nights I went out for bullheads with my father and Uncle Gary. Sometimes my brother and Cousin Gary also came along; though they tended to quickly lose interest in fishing, and amused themselves with bouts of tomfoolery along the creek-bank.

Each night always started at dusk with a nightcrawler hunt in our back yard. I stepped stealthily through the wet grass with a flashlight, seeking out the big nightcrawlers and trying to grab them before the light-shy creatures zipped back underground. They were kept in a Folger's coffee can with a handful of grass to keep them happy until we were ready to bait our hooks.

The men loaded the car with fishing rods, tackle boxes, lanterns, a package of sweet rolls, a thermos of coffee for the men, another of hot chocolate for the kids, and extra sweatshirts in case the night grew cold. Then we were on our way, heading usually to Bullhead Point on Twelve-Mile Creek in the Town of Wilson. All of us helped carry the gear down to the creek, walking along the muddy path in single file. We passed other fishing parties on the way, dark forms huddled around a lantern or small campfire, until we found a good spot for ourselves.

If there weren't already a few forked sticks set up, I searched around to find some and stuck them in the mud of the creek-bank. My father pumped up his Coleman lantern while I baited my hook and cast my line out onto the creek. I set the rod in the v of a forked stick and sat down on a log. My father poured a cup of coffee, Uncle Gary lit his cigar, and our night of fishing had begun.

Those were magical times. The glare of the hissing lantern cast eerie shadows onto the trees, and the dark water flowed silently past. I sat quietly, watching the tip of my rod for the twitch and jerk that told of a bullhead nibbling at the bait. I had been taught to always wait until the third solid twitch before

snapping back on my rod and setting the hook. The scented smoke of my father's pipe and Gary's cigar drifted over us while they talked quietly.

If the fishing was slow their talk would invariably drift into hunting tales, becoming more animated as it proceeded, with an increasing number of incredulous guffaws. A friendly rivalry existed between them, centered around the skill and prowess of their coon hounds. My father's top dog at the time was a Black-and-Tan called Ramblin' Rose, while Gary's hound was a tough Redbone named Jake.

My father might recount something clever that Rose had done to outsmart the raccoons, and Gary would feel compelled to defend his own dog's wit and resource:

"Well, now, speaking of clever dogs, you remember last autumn when Jake swam out into the middle of the creek trailing a coon. And that coon was right over his head on a big branch leaning over. Jake swam under that branch and stayed right there, treading water and barking treed."

"Treading water! Last time I saw Jake cross the creek he was cradled in your arms so he wouldn't get his paws wet. If you hadn't picked him up he'd still be there, standing on the bank and whimpering."

"Oh come on! I don't remember anything like that, and, well, even if I did, everybody knows the most intelligent hounds are the most sensitive. They have to be handled right. And you know Jake, he's a smart dog."

"Yeah, I'll admit he's done some clever things, mostly by accident, but he can't beat my Rose for brains. You weren't with me last season when Rose trailed a little coon into some thick brambles. I saw the coon crouched down way back in, but it was all thorns and I couldn't get in there. It was just a little baby coon anyways."

"Just about Rose's size," was Uncle Gary's muttered aside to me.

"Alright, alright. You want me to tell you or not? Well, I didn't want the coon, but I wondered what Rose would do. And I'm telling you right now, she backed off a few yards and crouched down and chirred just like a mother coon."

"Yaw!"

"Well, you can believe me or not, but that little baby coon came waddling out of those bushes right up to her."

"YAW!"

The very last time I ever went fishing was with Cousin Butch. He and I made an impromptu decision one Friday night to do some bullhead fishing. We remembered to bring along a case of beer, but forgot all about bait. It was too late to mess around trying to dig up some worms, so we stopped at Patterson's

Grocery in Newfane and bought a tin of cocktail shrimps. In the parking lot Butch's lantern fell out of his truck and smashed all over the blacktop.

We eventually got down to the creek and built a roaring fire, baited our hooks with the shrimps, and popped open a couple of beers. We spent the night standing around the fire, laughing and joking and occasionally remembering to check our lines. Butch caught an eel; I caught nothing. I think we ended up eating the tin of shrimps.

That was the end of my fishing career. The cares and burdens of adulthood were looming over me by then; and fishing, like too many of my youthful pursuits, fell by the wayside. My rod and tackle box moldered away down in the cellar until they were sold in a yard sale. As the years went by I sometimes thought of buying some new gear and heading out to cast a line or two, but it seemed like I never had enough time or cash to spare.

And now I know that I will probably never take up fishing again. The times have changed; and in some ways I have changed as well. Fishing, like hunting, no longer calls to me. I am content to enjoy the outdoors simply as an observer: to explore the fields, woods, and streams without feeling the desire to carry a gun or fishing rod.

Other things have changed as well. Recently I revisited a few of my old fishing haunts, and was dismayed by what the passing decades had wrought. The local farm ponds are silted up, choked with weeds, and no longer hold fish; and the north end of Keg Creek itself is now (thanks in part to a colony of beavers) an impassable wilderness of fallen trees, heavy brush, and deep squelching mud. I find it hard to believe today that I used to ride my bicycle along its banks.

Of course, the more popular fishing spots—the larger creeks, the Erie canal, the lake-side piers—have remained much the same. The section of Keg Creek south of Lake Road still sees a good deal of action during the spring and fall spawning runs. Over the years I had forgotten a lot from my own fishing days; but merely walking beside the rippling current and watching the anglers practice their art quickened my memories and brought back to mind many of the stories I've written here.

So now, as I roll the years away and relive the fishing adventures of my youth, I can see myself as I was then: stealing through the bushes towards a deep shady hole on a summer afternoon; begging egg-sacks from trout fishermen during the crowded steelhead run; or just sitting on a grassy bank beside my father while he puffed his pipe and flipped his line into the gliding stream.

Today I am just a bystander, and my tales of the big ones that got away are only memories out of the dim past. But I still feel a sense of kinship with those who seek out the pools and riffles with rod and reel in hand, especially with the young.

And I wonder: are there still forked sticks stuck into the mud at Bullhead Point? Do kids still carry cane poles down to the ponds and streams for an afternoon of fishing? Do they still feel the same excitement I once felt, as they watch their floating bobber in anticipation of that dip and twitch that tells of a fish on the line?

I think they do; and I saw evidence of this not too long ago: I was at a convenience store in Barker that

had a live bait vending machine. A young boy came in and bought a carton of red worms. This got the attention of a couple of older men who were standing nearby, one of whom asked him:

“You heading down to the lake?”

“Nope,” he replied. “Going to the crick.”

“The creek! What creek?”

“Down there.”

He pointed down the road to where Golden Hill Creek, not much bigger than a ditch at this point, flowed beneath a small bridge. After he left one of the men commented: “He’s not gonna catch nothin’ in there, ‘cept empty beer cans.”

But I watched as the young angler rode down the sidewalk on his bicycle, clutching both his fishing rod and the carton of bait in one hand while he steered with the other. He pulled into the fire department parking lot next to the creek and vanished from sight, no doubt sneaking into the cover of the trees to some secret hot spot. He knew what he was doing; and silently I wished him good luck and good fishing.