Spring Tides

The handwriting is familiar, but I have a harder time picturing the boy who wrote the words. The spelling was bad even then. Fish swam in "scholls," and on a spring evening 50 years ago, a man in a canoe "caucht" a 12-pound striper.

But the enthusiasm I sense thumbing through my boyhood fishing logs feels as familiar as the rough scrawl. "What a morning!" begins the entry for May 5, 1968, when the boy and two older friends took 17 stripers.

I still fish the cemetery marsh once or twice each spring, and the stripers are still there. It's clockwork — the arrival of fish; the smell of the waking marsh, river and sea; the clamorous song of terns, gulls and marsh birds.

As a kid, I never gave much thought to the location. I entered it in my log as the "grave yard." My focus was stripers, and when you're 14, you feel as if you'll live forever. Spring moved like a slow, lazy tide. I remember the afternoon when a freshening sou'wester caused the little flags marking the graves of war veterans to flap noisily. At the sound, I turned from the water and gazed back on the headstones and the fluttering colors pinned to the warm earth on spindly masts.

Today, I know far more permanent residents here than I did when I started jotting down notes on wind, tide and lure color. Many of the fishermen who stride purposefully across the pages of my journals are now buried beside the river. I am a grandfather, and whatever apprehension about mortality I tamped down as a kid stirs more easily these days. I cast until dusk and visit my parents' graves.

A few years after I made those spring entries, I sat in a sophomore high school biology class in Westerly, Rhode Island, run by a no-nonsense teacher named Al Anderson. It was fall, and I didn't yet realize that when school let out for the afternoon and weekends, Mr. Anderson morphed into Capt. Anderson, the pioneering charter captain who was catching big striped bass on live eels off Block Island, Rhode Island, from his 19-foot Aquasport.

Capt. Anderson started a fishing club in high school, and my friends and I were charter members. There is a photo in my office of eight classmates and me holding codfish after a spring headboat trip with the club.

The teacher and I remained friends for almost 50 years. An independent thinker and innovator in inshore and bluewater tactics, Capt. Anderson died earlier this year at age 79.

I fished with him dozens of times on several of the charter boats he owned during his 47 years as a working captain, all named *Prowler.* We had numerous conversations about everything from bass and tuna to the ancient Laurentide Ice Sheet that sculpted the rough topography we called home.

An inductee into the International Game Fish Association Hall of Fame, Capt. Anderson was not only a talented fisherman, but also a writer, conservationist and prolific fish tagger, a practice he started as a graduate student at Adelphi University, where he got a master's degree in (fish) parasitology. In all, he tagged more than 60,000 fish, including more Atlantic bluefin tuna and striped bass than anyone.

For a number of springs, I fished the North Rip off Block Island with the skipper as he prospected the waves of newly arriving stripers ahead of his clients. This was his favorite striper spot, and none of its vagaries escaped his eye or his memory.

We'd crab along the up-tide edge of the rip, working parachute jigs and single-hook J-Plugs back in the foaming waves. The strong currents sweeping over the bar produced a lively rip, and the spring fish were full of piss and vinegar. Many nights, they hammered our baits with an intensity that matched the topsy-turvy conditions. The fishing was fun and fast.

A New Jersey native, Capt. Anderson was tough, smart, outspoken, competitive — you either loved him or you didn't. He didn't suffer fools, and if he showed you how to do something once, he expected that you'd do it the right way (his way) the next time, or you might be hearing about it in right salty language.

The last time I visited the skipper was two years ago, when we were preparing a profile on him for the Winter 2016 issue of *Anglers Journal.*

Looking through old notes recently, I found an interview with Capt. Anderson from April 16, 2000. The previous day, he'd tagged and released 52 stripers from a tidal river in southern New England. He bragged that he'd hammered the fish and that "everybody else sucked wind." That was the blustery skipper talking. He paused, reflected, and my old teacher spoke as an old friend.

"I felt rejuvenated after yesterday's trip," he told me. "Like all was well with the world. It's amazing what a few floppy fish will do for your spirit. It's the same feeling I used to get when I'd catch flounder in the salt ponds many years ago. Everything was right with the world."

No Quarter

In hindsight, it was as much a prophecy as it was a casual observation. Any good young skipper worth his salt, the retired captain told me years ago, should be able to out-fish an older captain and leave him in his wake. If he can't, something's wrong.

The graybeard, who'd had a successful career, made the case that younger fishermen are more willing to adopt new technology, tackle and techniques. They're hungrier. Bolder. The comment was but a small part of a long interview on his life, but it's the only remark that I can recall from that conversation today. It stuck in my craw.

I was in my early 30s — neither young nor old, but with enough energy and experience fishing the surf and from boats to begin to connect the dots. In my bones I was certain I was only going to get sharper, wiser and fishier as I got older. I wasn't worried about being overtaken by a school of whippersnappers.

Back then, I worked as a reporter during the day, and *lived* the life of a fish bum at night. That's when I felt most alive. So did my band of misfit friends. We didn't give a damn about money or sleep. We just wanted to catch stripers.

We gave no quarter to the fish, ourselves or to anyone who couldn't keep up. We fished as if our lives depended on it.

From March through November, we lived for the tides. We eavesdropped on conversations in breakfast joints, boatyards and tackle shops, anywhere someone might have intel on fish. We'd try anything that might give us an edge, experimenting with tactics, techniques, lures and baits. I followed the fish from Nova Scotia to Virginia. We even worried about who was on "our" rock or drifting over "our" reef when we weren't there.

In those days, you didn't give away information except to the guys you fished with — and even they could be suspect. Brothers kept secrets from brothers. And if anyone was foolish or brash enough to actually ask where you'd caught your fish, you'd veil the truth to mislead them — a polite way of saying you'd lie. My fishing buddy and I could even talk in a shorthand language of hand signals and abbreviated sentences when we were around other people.

"You guys are like Freemasons," said a coworker, shaking his head after witnessing an exchange. "Secret hand signals, secret words …" Seems silly now. Just a couple of knuckleheads thinking they had something to hide.

Even in the midst of it, I knew it couldn't last. Fishing friends burned out, died or moved on to more age-appropriate pursuits. *No más,* they whispered. That level of mania strained marriages, friendships and careers. The pace wasn't sustainable with age. The good captain was right.

I still fish hard in spurts, just not with any sustained fury. It's not numbers I'm after but something more sublime, or so I tell myself. But the old obsession is always lurking around the edges, nibbling, teasing, promising more than it can deliver.

It is early April, and 6 inches of heavy, wet snow has fallen. Late afternoon is raw. I follow the railroad tracks to a steep path leading to the marsh and a small tidal river. The cord grass is a patchwork of snow and brown. I cross the soggy world to a secluded wintering hole for stripers, which a young fisherman in his 20s showed me.

I am alone. The temperature is in the low 30s. I'm wearing waders, a winter coat and a watch cap. My hands are cold, but they don't burn.

It's very still. Bare trees and clouds reflect off the mirrored surface. The cove is full of fish that have wintered over, but they are closemouthed, probably due to the drop in temperature. I catch a few and stay until dusk. I thread my way back along a narrow, wooded path and over the remnants of a barbed wire fence and climb the steep bank to the tracks.

I navigate a goat trail that roughly parallels the rails. Five minutes in, I spot the headlight of the 150-mph Acela Express. It has found me at a spot where the bank is so steep that all one can do is take a couple of steps away from the tracks and sit on the gravel slope. The *angle of repose.*

I turn my back to the tracks and at the last moment cock my head to glance at the maelstrom whistling past, so close I could touch it with my rod tip.

Fish, darkness, snow, solitude. And now this. The blast is like a great gust from a powerful storm. The world shakes and for a moment you remember how it feels to be alive.

The Beautiful Curse Continues

For three decades, I anticipated the arrival of an offspring who would enjoy chasing fish to the far horizons with his or her old man. We would be a pair of happy, moonstruck lunatics, fishing side by side from boat, beach and beyond.

I had three daughters and a son, and they all fished with me to varying degrees. Mostly, though, they just wanted to spend time with their father. Fishing came second.

Then came Ben, a precocious 6-year-old who can cast like a fiend and has learned more about fishing from YouTube than from spending time on the water. He's my oldest grandson and my latest wingman. My job is to put a little salt in his socks and keep stoking the flames of his fishing desires.

Right now, they're burning pretty brightly. "All he talks about is fishing, Dad," says my oldest daughter, Alana, an administrator with a nonprofit organization. "He's driving everybody crazy. It's usually the first thing he asks when I pick him up at school. Not, 'Hi, Mom' or 'How was your day?' It's, 'Can we go fishing?' "

He's after his father just as hard. "Every night when I get home from work, it's, 'Dad, can we go fishing?' " says Dan, who is an engineer. "He wants to challenge me to a three-hour fish-off to see who can catch the most fish."

Ben also talked his father into downloading a photo-sharing and social networking fishing app. And when the two were shopping for football gear at a brick-and-mortar store recently, Ben wandered off. His father found him in the fishing section, where Ben convinced him he needed to buy a package of Ripple Shad PowerBait.

"He's been begging me to buy a boat and a saltwater rod," Dan says, amused and amazed. "I told him we can't afford a boat. So he's been asking Siri on my phone to search for the cheapest boat that's for sale."

Ben's desire to fish seems to be completely self-generated. His father and I fished often before Ben was born. Dan is a good companion and a capable fisherman, but he didn't initiate the outings. I took Ben to a local pond when he was 3 or 4 to catch sunfish. He liked it well enough, but there was nothing to suggest his recent transformation into a fish fiend.

Ben is bright, verbal and athletic. In addition to fishing, he plays golf, baseball, flag football and soccer. He has good hand-eye coordination, and he's very competitive. "He wants to win everything," his father says. "And he'll bend the rules. He keeps score on fish. And he typically skews it in his favor."

Sounds like a born fisherman.

The three of us fished together on Father's Day this year. We caught a few largemouth. Ben sprayed casts around the pond and talked up a storm. He also may have heard some salty phraseology inadvertently slip out of my mouth when I missed a fish or two.

My slip of the tongue took me back to the first time I swore in front of my father. It was on a secluded pond in Rhode Island more than 50 years ago, with my friend Peter. We were casting floating balsa minnows for bass when I wrapped one around a branch. Forgetting for a moment who was there, I said, "Shit."

My father just stared at me. Peter grinned at me from around my father's back.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry Dad," I uttered. "I didn't mean to say that. It won't happen again."

About 10 minutes later, I missed a fish and swore a second time, after which I severely reined in my verbosity.

This past Father's Day, my son-in-law quietly reminded me after my second verbal faux pas that young Ben was sitting in the boat. Ben remained poker-faced, giving no indication that he'd heard anything worthy of note. Later, he confided to his dad, "Cappy said some bad words."

Toward the end of summer, Ben and I spent five hours on a spring-fed pond fishing for sunnies, bluegills and bass, from shore and from a noisy old aluminum rowboat. We had a great time. We heard a barred owl somewhere along the ridge to the east — Ben later told his mother we had "owl luck." Dragonflies were busy hovering over lily pads. And we caught some nice bass along the edge of the weeds and in a clear pool under a canopy of low branches.

In another spot, I tried to place a swimming plug beside a small wooden float tied to shore, but the line wound up just over the tip of a branch, held in place by a leaf or two. I retrieved the lure until it hung straight down from the tree limb and adjacent to the float. "Let's see if we can get lucky, Ben," I said. "Watch this."

I wiggled the rod tip, causing the lure to dapple the water. A bass promptly smacked it, freeing it from the limb. I handed the rod to Ben, who brought the fish in.

Ben kept count using the latest math. The final tally was Ben: six bass, 11 sunfish, three or four bluegills. Cappy: zero.

A fisherman is born.