

# A Fishing Life

**G**iven enough time and distance, you begin to see more clearly those events that shaped your fishing life. They appear to me now as 60-year-old memories that evoke the same feelings as on the days the actual episodes occurred. My recollections are wrapped as tightly as tarred marline around the wooden frame of a handline and include a dock, a lighthouse, an old skiff and various mentors — a professor, a lobsterman and a tall, lanky outdoorsman from Campbell County, Tennessee.

The emotional essence of such touchstones gives our early memories enduring and propulsive power. They enable us to look back and connect the many dots that steered us toward a lifetime devotion to chasing fish. My earliest ones stretch so far back that it often feels as if I was “born” to be a fisherman. Silly perhaps, but I’m certain some of you feel the same way.

In a college class, I studied the existentialist philosophers — Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, Buber and others. A quote by Camus sent me down this contemplative path: “A man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.” For me, it was the fishy happenings that occurred on a town dock — home to a trio of aging, old-school charter captains — that served up the many delights and wonders that a boy smitten by the salty world came to internalize.

I sat between my father and my older brother, and learned to handline cunners, or bergalls, which were plentiful 60 years ago around the pilings. I learned to smash the shells of surf clams on the raised heads of the spikes holding the splintered planks in place, while herring gulls bawled for our catch. This kindling ignited the fire. A lifetime accumulation of experiences with fish, adventure, partners, friends and mentors fed the flames.

My friends and I graduated from cunners and handlines to spinning tackle and lures, which we used on tinker mackerel and snapper blues. I trapped mummichogs and a smattering of eels in a minnow trap set in a salt marsh a short bicycle ride from my home. I sold the mummies for a penny apiece and the eels for a nickel to the Book & Tackle Shop in Watch Hill, Rhode Island.

Bernard “Bernie” Gordon was the proprietor of this unique shop that sold used books and a smattering of fishing tackle. It was one of


my boyhood hangouts when it rained in summer. I remember the shop as pleasantly musty, a mix of the salt air wafting in from the open doors and the mildew emanating from nearly 10,000 books that filled the floor-to-ceiling shelves. I’d disappear for long periods among those tall stacks, sit my butt on the floor and explore any book remotely concerned with fishing. Gordon, an author and bespeckled professor at Northeastern University in Boston, where he taught classes in physical oceanography and marine resources, offered recommendations.

My education morphed into higher learning when I got my first proper surf outfit and started fishing at the Watch Hill Lighthouse, a short walk from the dock but miles away in many important ways. The lighthouse represented the adult world. Everything was bigger, stronger and more intimidating, from the waves and currents to the towering adult fishermen with their 12-foot rods. I knew I’d caught a glimpse of the prize the first time I saw a 40-pound striper lying on the rocks.

I kept my eyes open and closely watched how the men who caught regularly went about their business. What lures did they throw, how did they retrieve them and, most important, why did they make the choices they did? I had so much to learn. Striped bass fishing was a particularly guarded world back then, and not many adults were interested in sharing their know-how with a kid. A small group of three or four sharpies would grow quieter when I lingered on the periphery of their discussions.

As the seasons progressed, the men got used to seeing me and eventually would nod their heads and affirm my existence. Some would even answer my questions if I caught them in the right mood. I addressed them with the respect I reserved back then for teachers — and I knew enough to withhold any of my own half-baked opinions. I was a sponge, with little to offer in the way of original thoughts on the ways of stripers. I gave them the respect they had earned, and they, in turn, showed me just enough.

I certainly made my share of mistakes, but I had youth, enthusiasm and plenty of time and energy on my side. Over the years, I grew “fishy” from this early exposure. I learned the basics from the ground up, from tying good knots to reading the water and a thousand other details, including a ton of hard-won, how-to knowledge.

More than 60 years ago, I willingly started down a path that I am still happily following. Some days, it even feels like I am starting over. I now have plenty to learn from the current crop of skilled younger anglers who are imbued with that curiosity, fish-smarts and stamina inherent to our tribe. And new memories are always in the making. 

# Old Haunts

**I** stood on a windy hill on an early April evening, smelling the rain blowing off the sound as it moved up the river valley, shrouding it in sheets of mist.

*At that moment, I made up my mind that, unlike the previous season, I would spend as many days in the field as possible. Not for love, money or work would I miss another stretch of productive spring tides. I knew that if I was to be of any use to anyone, including myself, I had to get back to the edges where land meets the sea. To those nooks and crannies where I have long found fish and a measure of peace.*

When I wrote that years ago, it was the truth. It still is. Spring is the season of renewal, but that poses a problem for those of us who fish like mad. Perspective comes later.

To keep fishing as if it were a second job while also working full time and raising a family is a grind. It guarantees that you will run yourself ragged — to catch a tide, to finish writing a story, to pick up a child after school. You try to do it all, but no one is applauding your middling performance, certainly not at home. And maybe not at work, either. Fish refuse to conform to family or work schedules, even a nocturnal species like striped bass. And if you're compulsive about fishing, you're liable to spring a few leaks.

Looking back on my notes from that spring, I knew I either returned with decisiveness or risked a slow, spiritual death. You know you've crossed the fishing gods when you lose track of the tides and moon phases that you once held firmly in your head. You lie awake at night worrying about tuition money and work, rather than scheming over fish.

You can dull the static for a while, but you can't kill it without killing yourself. I was overweight and drinking too much. I feared I would lose the drive to chase fish deep into the night from skiff and shore, to lean against a beach log and sleep to the sound of surf.

I sat in an easy chair, anesthetizing myself with top-shelf liquor, pretending that its price tag somehow elevated the act of

getting sloshed. I saw shades of myself in an article on high-functioning alcoholics. Is that really what I'd become?

I checked in with a good buddy who has been as dry as the Mojave for more than 30 years. "You ain't no drunk," he said. "Believe me, I know a drunk when I see one."

Semantics?

Looking back is tricky business. We tend to doll-up our failings. I make no apologies for the long stretch when I worked hard and fished hard, even though that meant not being home as often as I would have had I simply worked 9-to-5 and golfed on weekends. Today, I'd be criticized for having a poor "work-life balance"

— even without fishing putting its big thumb on my Boga. It becomes a lot easier once your kids have grown and your career starts winding down, but that usually corresponds with a decline in battery life. Who is fishing harder at 70 than they were at 40?

I tried to keep everyone in my orbit happy. But when the big fish were on the move, there just wasn't enough time for everyone and everything. That's when I'd roll over anything that stood between me and the fish. It was then that I felt as if I was moving from one life to another, slipping back into the house before dawn like a creature from the abyss. Wrung out, sometimes satiated, sometimes hungrier. I clearly was not the best version of myself, but even today I have no regrets.

My wife and I have always given each other the time and space to chase our dreams. For Patty, that has meant time in the mountains. For me, it's been scales and tails. It wasn't always a smooth road, but we both believed Joseph Campbell's mantra: "Follow your bliss."

I still have an enduring fondness for those crummy-looking beach towns in early spring, when they're still boarded up, the sand has drifted in the parking lots, and the roads are buckled with frost heaves. Those are the places we used to bum around, looking for fish and looking for trouble.

When the season arrives in earnest, I will willingly respond to the sound and smell of the spring surf and the stripers flooding their old haunts — and mine. 🐟

# Newfangled

**T**he natural world doesn't give a hoot about the size of your portfolio, the type of graphite in your fly rod or the number of outboards bolted to your transom. We care, but the fish we chase are blissfully ignorant.

Change is a constant in our discombobulated world where technology rushes past tomorrow before today has been put to bed. Everything has a shorter shelf life. The old ways? *Fuhgeddaboutit.*

How will this throw-away thinking change our fishing world, which moves to natural cycles, where the gravitational pull of moon and sun on our waters is elemental and essential? I suspect we will continue to get by on those hard outdoor skills we learned coming up through the hawse pipe. How to improvise, jury rig and think on your feet. How to rig a bait, toss a fly into a headwind, run a small boat in a rough sea. Reading the water — be it a trout stream, farm pond or a remote beach — is not likely to change, either.

There's a saying that most of us have heard ad nauseam: Most fishing lures are designed to catch the eye of the angler, rather than the fish. The same could be said of a multitude of outdoor products described breathlessly as *innovative, field-tested, expert-approved, one-of-a-kind* and a host of other platitudes, most of the phrases rendered meaningless through overuse, some by exaggeration.

Outdoor gear today is, indeed, infinitely better than it was 60 years ago, when I first made my way to the water's edge with a handline and a sea clam. Boats and engines, too, have advanced dramatically. When I first started fishing the surf, I put my feet into plastic bags held in place by elastic bands. Then I'd slip into boots that didn't quite come up to my knees. I got used to being wet and cold, which only made me certain that the fish I was chasing had to be special.

Today's well-made outdoor products are lighter, stronger and more reliable; I have a hard time wearing out my fishing, hiking and camping equipment, or my boat and outboard. For that, I am both thankful and willing to open my wallet. Travel light.

I do, however, have some nitpicks, not with the products but, rather, with the spin that accompanies them. I recently read a review hawking camping gadgets that promise to "make you feel right at home." But I don't want to feel like I'm at home when I'm immersed

in nature. I enjoy sleeping on the ground and going without cell service, running water or electricity. I like reading a book by lantern light and cooking over campfire coals.

I don't want everything in life to be easy. I want my back to ache from physical work. I like my hands when they're cut, nicked and sore as hell from handling fish after fish. When I'm wet-wading among the rocks and fishing hard, I'm not surprised to look down and see rivulets of blood running down my shins; you don't feel the slice of a barnacle until later. And if I'm not lifted off my feet or knocked onto my keister at least once this fall, it simply means I'm not fishing hard enough. As kids, we learned to get up, dust ourselves off and get back to the business at hand.

I'm not interested in dragging my house and all its amenities into the woods or out to the offshore canyons. To what end? To watch television rather than gaze at the night sky? But who would argue with air-conditioning 100 miles offshore in the tropics? And I'm not ready for glamping, even though my countdown to septuagenarian status has begun.

I don't want everything to be simple just because the financial where-withal exists to make it so. We lose some of our edge, intuition and perspective when that occurs. Accomplishments that are hard-fought are the ones that remain in heart and mind. If I can be dry and warm, with a nicely balanced surf outfit or fly rod in hand, so much the better.

I love the world of wind, spray, thumping surf and screaming gulls. That's where I feel most alive. Fishing keeps me from losing my way and zagging into one of those midlife course corrections that leave you aground on an island of regret. Whether you pound nails, trade stocks, deliver the mail or bus tables, chasing a fish you love is so unlike anything we do for work that it lifts our spirits and refreshes the soul.

Don't overcomplicate the wondrous chase all of us are engaged in. You don't need every fancy doodad known to humankind. You want to be the pursuer in this production, the person holding the rod, not the one dangling from the end of the line, endlessly swiping your credit card for stuff you'll never use.

I was in a tackle shop once with an art director who gravitated toward every colorful, gaudy lure on the pegboards. "You sure like shiny things, don't you," observed the owner, who is a friend. "Good thing you aren't a fish." 