

An Old Timer's Fish Tales

By
Dale Summers



*Fishing Anecdotes, Stories
and Recollections
of an old Florida Cracker*

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(Free Sample)

Chapter 1

A Little About Who I Am

As we southerners put it, I was “born and raised” near the geological center of the state of Florida. I entered this world in 1939 at the home of one of my Grandparents on Orange Street in the lovely town of Ocala. Back then, it was a normal practice for doctors to make house calls, even to deliver a baby at home.

Ocala is located smack dab in the center of Marion County. I grew up and went to school there, and that’s where my love of fishing was formed. But, more about that later on.



I graduated from Ocala High School in 1956. As my parents didn't have the money to send me to college, and no local junior colleges available at that time, I went to work, first in a local bank for a year, then at the Photo Shop at Silver Springs. I worked at "The Springs" from 1957 to 1963. In the summer of 1963 I met Ginny, who worked in the restaurant. Two and a half months later, we got married, quit our jobs, and with only a couple of hundred dollars, we set out on our life's adventure.

After looking for work in Daytona and Cocoa Beach, we ended up in Orlando, I worked at an office supply company while I went to a technical college to learn computer programming. In 1967 I went to work at the Kennedy Space Center, then called Cape Canaveral, as a computer operator supporting the pre-launch activities of the Apollo and Skylab missions.

Many folks have gathered on the bank of the Indian River at Titusville to watch the launches of the Apollo and space shuttles flights, but it's much more exciting to watch them from the roof of the building where I worked, only two miles from the launch pads. That's a feeling hard to describe. I had only a tiny part in the Apollo and Skylab launches, but feel like I was a part of history being made. I accumulated a lot of memorabilia during my time at the space center. I

have certificates for each launch signed by the astronauts who flew the mission, two medalions that contain metal from the spacecrafts and other various momentos.

In 1973, I moved my family to southern Maryland after being employed by Honeywell to set up a computer operation for the Navy at the Patuxent River Navel Air Test Center, or Pax River NATC as it was called locally, in St. Marys County. That locale plays a part of my fishing stories later on.



St. Marys county is surrounded by water on three sides, the Patuxent River to the north, The Potomac River to the south, and the Chesapeake Bay to the east. The Pax River NATC is located where the Patuxent River enters the bay. I left one state with great fishing to reside in another one with similar fishing conditions, just a smaller area to fish.

I later moved 40 miles north to Charles County where I lived until 2001. After being laid off in the tidal wave of job losses due to the new recessions, I decided to return to my native Florida where I now reside in Lake Alfred, a small town (we now have two traffic lights) on the outskirts of Winter Haven.

Winter Haven, in Polk County, Florida, is a paradise for fresh water fishermen, as the county has 554 natural freshwater lakes. The city of Winter Haven has over 50 lakes fully or partly inside the city limits. Sixteen of these lakes are connected by canals (south chain) and another five are connected by canals (north chain), from a project started in the 1920s. These are called the Chain of Lakes.



Canal connecting two lakes.

Due to low water in some of the lakes, not all of the canals are navigable all of the time. The picture above shows the

canal between Lakes Louise and Winterset in Winter Haven.

My home near Winter Haven, Florida, had boat ramps on five lakes that are within 5 minutes of my driveway, and a few more within a 10 minute drive. I could drive to a boat ramp, launch my boat and be in the water in 15 minutes any time I wanted to go fishing.

In 2006 I was retired at the age of 67 years old. Besides fishing, I love to do woodworking and I prefer being outside doing something to being cooped up inside. On days when it's too hot or cold for my old bones to be outside, I spend my time reading, watching TV or on the computer.

In 2015 we bought a home in the country on 7.4 acres of land that already had a workshop, storage shed, about a dozen fruit and citrus trees, and 71 blueberry plants in tubs with an irrigation system. I didn't have as many lakes near me as in Lake Alfred, and have to drive about 20 minutes to get to the ones I do fish. And I bought a pontoon boat to take my wife fishing as she has difficulty getting in and out of my bass boat. I am still fishing at age 78 and plan to do so for as long as I can launch and get in and out of my boats.

Well, that's about it for who I am, so why don't I take you back to my Florida of the 1940s...

Chapter 2

Fishing Was A Part Of Our Lives

My Dad was very serious about anything he undertook. That included his hunting and fishing. Being that serious meant that taking along a little kid who would want to play more than fish and probably make too much noise and scare away the fish just wasn't in the cards. This attitude was probably more the norm for parents of the 1940s and 1950s, than it is today. Back then, the word "nurturing" just wasn't in our vocabulary.

However, my Aunt Mary and Grandma Perkins would take my little sister and me fishing with them. Usually this was fishing from some dock on a lake or beside the Sharpes Ferry bridge crossing the Ocklawaha River.

All they used then were cane poles with worms on a hook and a cork on the line for a float (that we called a "bobber"). I'm talking about regular corks that came in bottlenecks or we bought at the hardware store. There were no plastic or styrofoam floats like we use today.

Fishing with my Aunt and Grandma, I learned patience in waiting for a fish to bite or I got scolded and made to sit down until I could learn to be more quiet. They took their fishing seriously too, but not so much that they wouldn't take us kids along with them. And fishing wasn't just for sport. We ate what we caught as times were tough and money hard to come by

I don't remember many bream being too small for Aunt Mary or Grandma to keep and take home. The smaller ones, fried whole were so crisp that you ate them bones and all. The larger ones they picked the meat off the bones for us kids so we wouldn't swallow a tiny bone that might get stuck in the throat.

We never had to buy worms for bait either. Both of my Grandmas had "worm beds", a piece of ground where worms stayed because they got fed there. Grandma Perkins' worm bed was in a corner where a room was built off the old garage at the back of their lot. She would throw food scraps in it and mix them up in the soil that was so rich from all that worm poop that it became a rich compost and loaded with fat worms.

My other Grandma had her worm bed beside the back door steps, where she'd throw her kitchen scraps and coffee grounds (Grandma Perkins didn't have any coffee grounds,

as she drank tea}. So, all we had to do for fish bait was just go outside and dig up some worms to put in a coffee can to take fishing.

We would mostly catch different varieties of Florida Bream (2), (down here in Florida, we pronounce that as “Brim”), such as bluegill, redbreast, shellcrackers and stumpknockers (local name for spotted sunfish). Cleaned, dipped in a flour/corn meal mixture and fried golden brown, they are all good eating, especially with grits and hushpuppies.

When we were younger, my sister and I did go on fishing outings to the river or lakes with our Mom and Dad, and sometimes their friends and their kids. Usually the Moms would relax on the banks of the river or lake and us kids would play, swim or explore while the men were out catching our dinner.

Mom would bring cans of pork-n-beans, grits, flour and corn meal, and the big cast iron frying pan. When the men would return with a mess of fish (usually largemouth Bass or Specks), they would build a fire and cook the fish, grits and hush puppies for dinner. You just can't beat eating fresh fried fish right on the shore of a lake or river.

Did I hear you ask “What is a speck”? That’s what we crackers call the black crappie. In Florida, the black crappie is known as a speckled perch for it’s coloring, or just “speck”. I have seen them as long as 18”, but haven’t caught one that size in recent years.



A 12" Speck...or Black Crappie

Did Dad ever take me fishing? Yes he surely did. But, I suppose that was when he thought I old enough to learn proper fishing. When I was about 11 or 12 (around 1950), he started taking me along and teaching me how to fish for bass. By that I mean SERIOUS fishing. That meant no playing around in the boat, and more importantly, being quiet and patient (neither of which is easy for an 11 year old). But, I’d already had lessons in patience while fishing from my aunt and grandma.

Dad's narrow, 12' long home-made boat, built in the Louisiana bateau style, was powered by a 5 hp Martin 20 outboard motor, a sought after antique today. Before he would teach me to be a fisherman, he said I had to be prepared by learning the basics. Dad's idea of learning the basics was that before I could fish, I had to learn two skills. They were to paddle the boat where he wanted it to go, and to man the outboard motor while he fished with the jigger pole (I'll tell you more about that fishing method in another story and you'll see why running the outboard properly was so critical).

After I had spent a few months mastering those skills, paddling the boat and running the motor while he got to do all of the fishing, he finally began to teach me bait casting and other fishing skills. Sometimes, I think he just wanted someone to do the driving while he got to do all of the fishing, but to be fair, he was a great teacher when it came to fishing or anything else and soon were sharing the driving and fishing.

We fished for Bass and Specks from Dad's boat that he built of cypress and marine plywood. Being very narrow, it paddled easily, almost like a canoe. The two of us could lift it in and out of the back of his fishing buggy, an old late 1930s model ford with the rear seat removed. It also had no doors because he had rolled it several times while

racing a friend on a local county road and the doors got beat up so he just took them off. Of course, no one had seat belts unless he was driving a real race car, so you just held on to make sure you didn't fall out while riding in it.



Dad's Fishing Buggy

There is more to this chapter, and 18 additional chapters in this book. You can purchase this book in .PDF format as a download for \$2.99, payable by credit or debit card via PayPal, or by using your own PayPal account if you have one.