

FISH PATHWAYS

FINDING ROUTES BIG FISH
USE ALONG THE BOTTOM



TOP PREDATORS GET THE BEST LIE



**The big cats on the
Serengetti:**

1. Pick the best spots (shade in 110 degree heat)
2. Sleep a lot
3. Are watched by their prey, who take notice when they start to move
4. So it is with big fish

BIG FISH ARE TOP PREDATORS



Big pike, bass, walleye, trout, and catfish are carnivores; Grand River

ALL HIGHER ANIMALS ARE AWARE OF THEIR ENVIRONMENT AND, BY INSTINCT, FIND PATHWAYS TO MOVE AROUND IN IT



Hunters study **deer behavior** and note that:

- **Deer follow pathways** or “runs”, using treelines, etc
- They **relate to changes in terrain**
- Often they are **active only once or twice a day**
- They prefer low-light, stable weather conditions
- So it is with big fish

FISH USE PATHWAYS ALSO



They are called **STRUCTURE**, the bottom of the lake that is different from the surrounding area.

Structure is:

1. Made up of **breaks** and **breaklines**
2. **Breaks** are wood, rocks, sunken objects, etc. Fish **pause at breaks**
3. **Breaklines** are a **change in depth along a line** such as dropoff, weedline, channel edge, etc. Fish **move along breaklines** for their pathways
4. Breaklines can also be from water color, temperature, or current differences, especially in large lakes with little bottom structure (Lake MI) or from bottom consistency changes (e.g. mudline, transition areas)

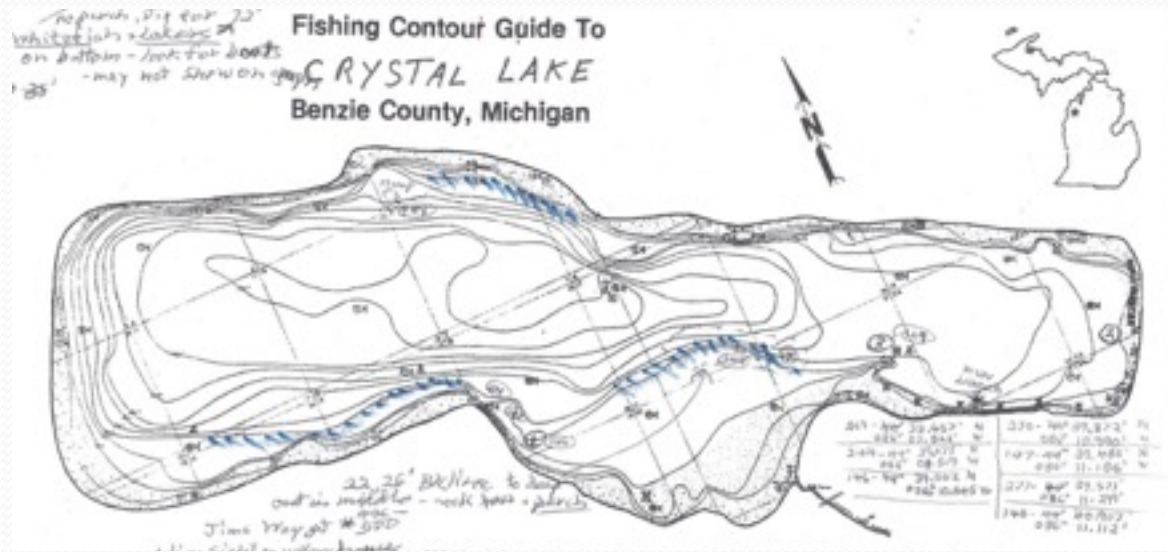
UNDER WATER STRUCTURE IS NOT EASY TO SEE



2 bars with feeder channel between

But we can guess from terrain and contour maps, then go and explore with sounder and lures

CONTOUR MAPS AID US IN GATHERING INFORMATION



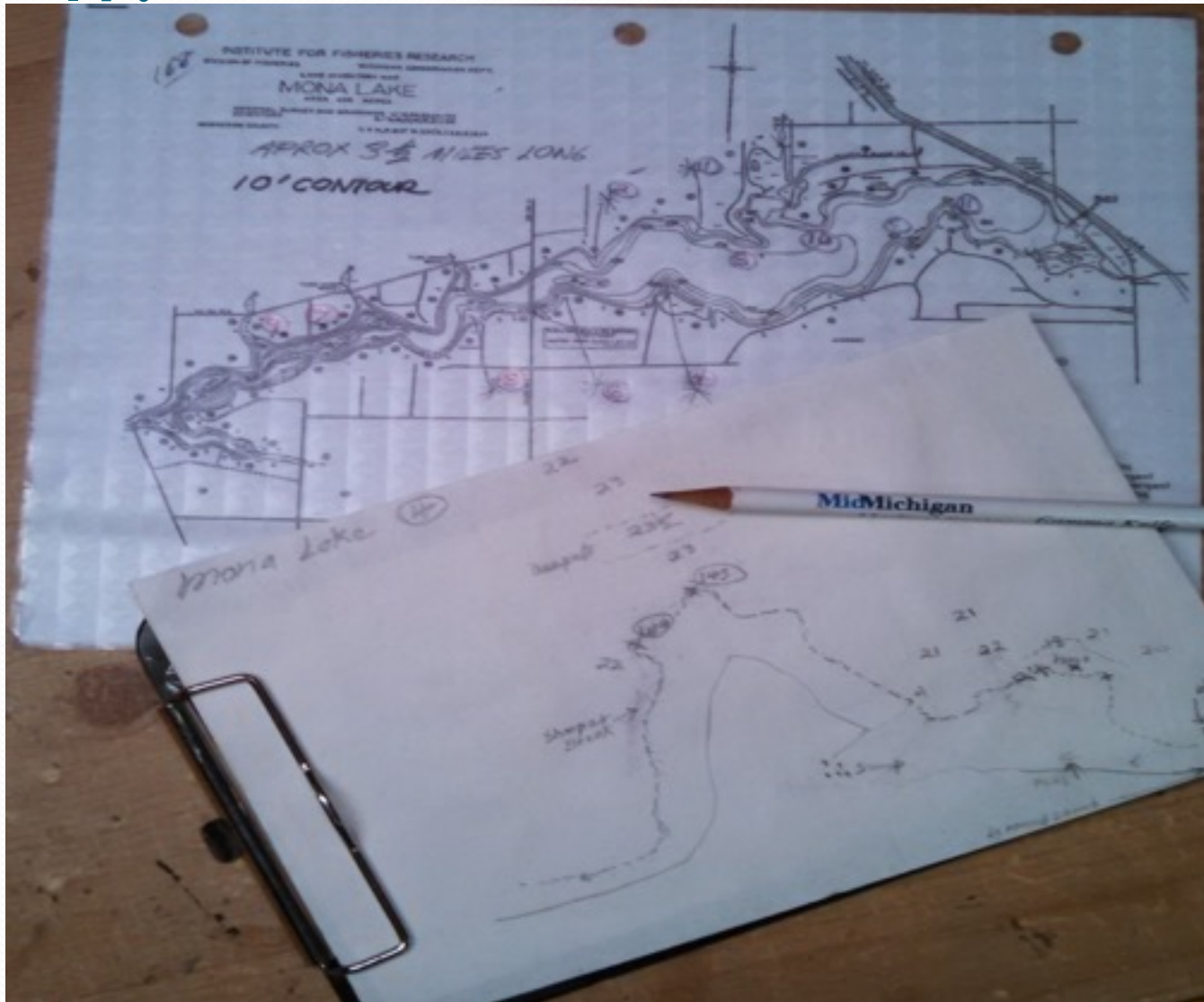
- 1) Most are **not very accurate**. Even if they were, you do your **fishing on the water**, not the map
- 2) **Information can be added** to them
- 3) Studying them indicates **where structure** might be found
- 4) For best detail, you must **go to structures and learn them on the water**

GETTING DETAIL ABOUT PATHWAYS

- **Depth sounders and graphs provide information**
- **Lake contour maps will get us close**
- **Contour lines close together indicate a breakline**
- **Contour lines close in one spot is a sharper break**
- **Trolling is the best teacher to get the most detail**
- **The most common structure is a ridgelike bar**
- **Markers can be used to show features on the water**
- **Learning form and depth details should be combined with fishing---get on it and fish it!**
- **GPS waypoints can help, but-----**

“YOU DON’T KNOW IT IF YOU CAN’T DRAW IT!”

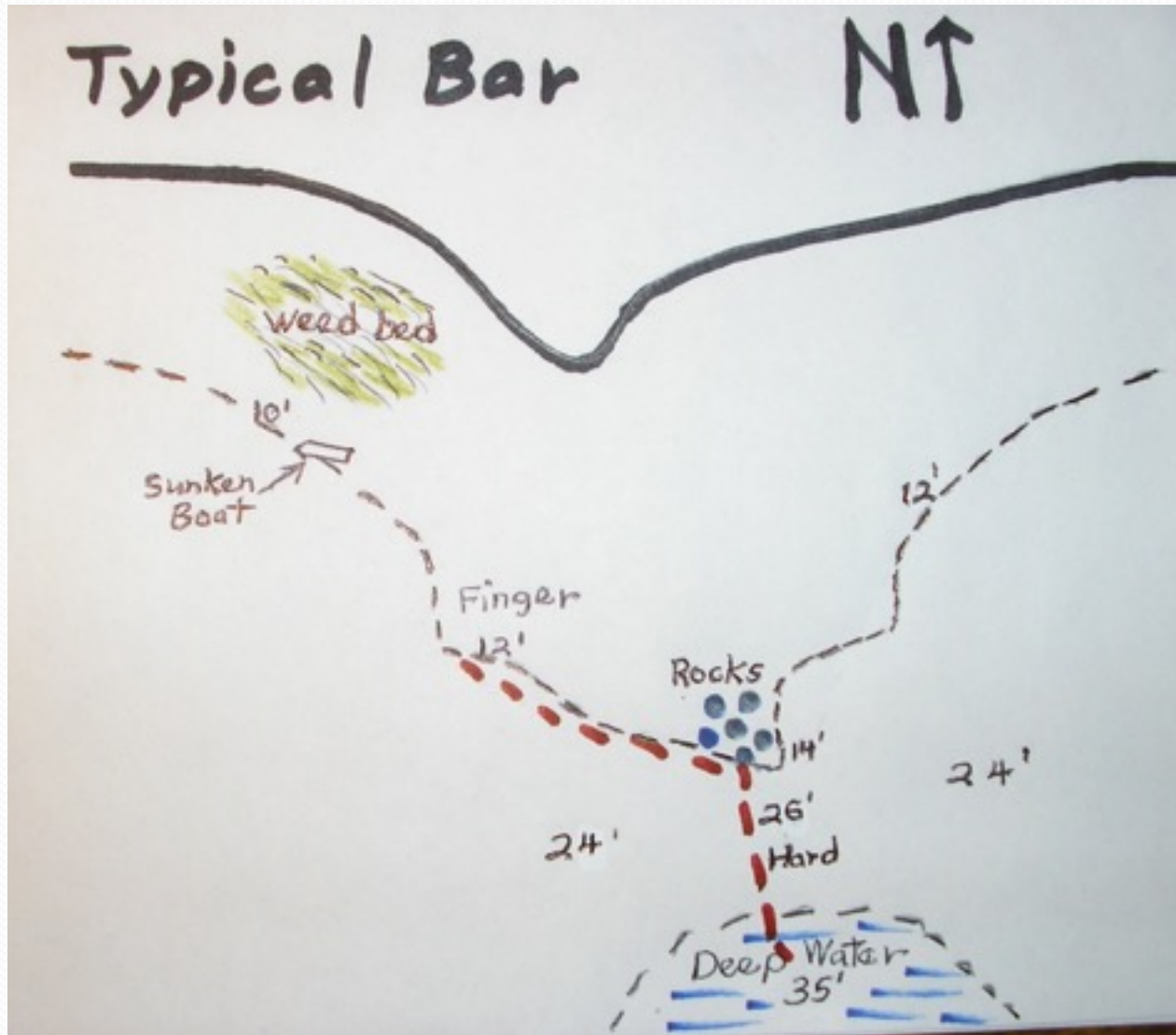
Terry O’Malley



It is smart to **record learned information for use in the future.** Takes about 5 minutes. **Fish Pathways are permanent.**

The **best fishermen do this** (e.g. in magazine articles)

WHAT DO PATHWAYS LOOK LIKE?



A hand-drawn detail map

- A bar is the most common structure
- A 10-14 foot breakline forms this pathway
- Hard bottom at 26 feet is the contact point
- Fish pause at breaks (rocks, finger, sunken boat, and weedbed)
- Fish spend most all their time in their deepwater home
- Why don't fish go to the right?
- Why is this not an excellent weather condition?

DETAIL MAPPING

- **1) WILL THIS STRUCTURE PRODUCE?**
- Start in the shallows and run out towards deep water watching sounder. Does it lead all the way to deep water?
- **2) WHAT IS THE FORM?**
- Get on the first major breakline and follow it with depth sounder, dropping a marker on major features (points, fingers, sharper breaks). Go off each marker to determine the longest, narrowest, sharpest, deepest break to the deepest water in the area. That is the contact point. Draw a rough map (5 minutes invested)
- **THEN FISH THE STRUCTURE** by trolling and casting to get more information and locate the fish.

HOW DO WE PRESENT LURES AND LEARN A STRUCTURE AT THE SAME TIME?



Pike caught while mapping a Platte Lake structure by trolling

BY TROLLING USING LURES WITH ACCURATE DEPTH CONTROL

- We **strain the waters** of a structure starting in the shallows and work progressively deeper
- By trolling, we can **feel the bottom hardness** and watch the **path of the boat** to determine outline form
- We can **throw markers** or put GPS waypoints on **prominent features** of the structure (e.g. tip of bar)
- If we **catch a fish**, we have **found** part of the **pathway**
- Even if we don't catch one, **after drawing a map**, we can **predict a pathway** they will use--if we know about fish behavior
- Structure details should be **saved**. They are **permanent**

SPOONPLUGS: EXCELLENT DEPTH AND SPEED CONTROL



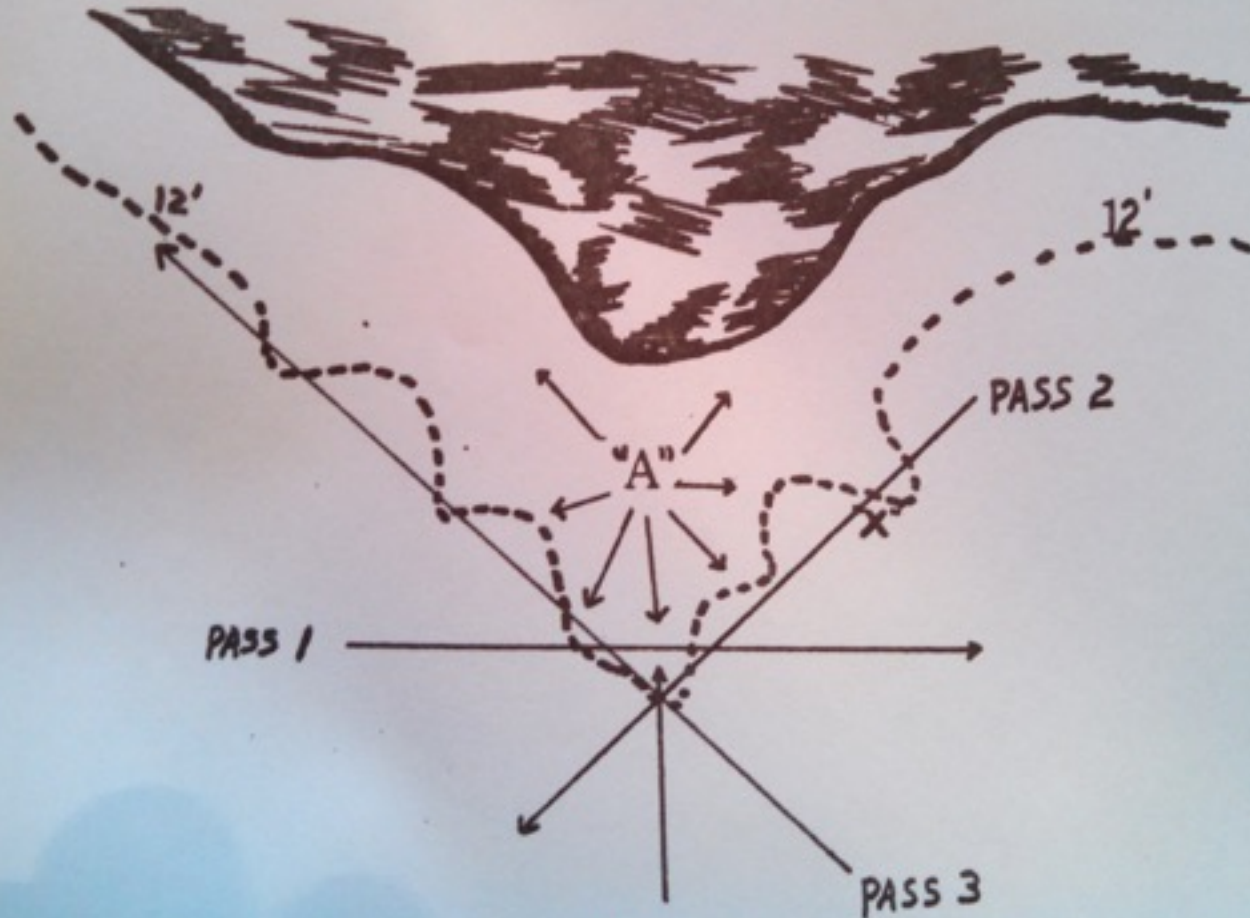
7 sizes

Accurate from
2-25 feet

Depth
remains
constant at
different
speeds

FISHING A STRUCTURE

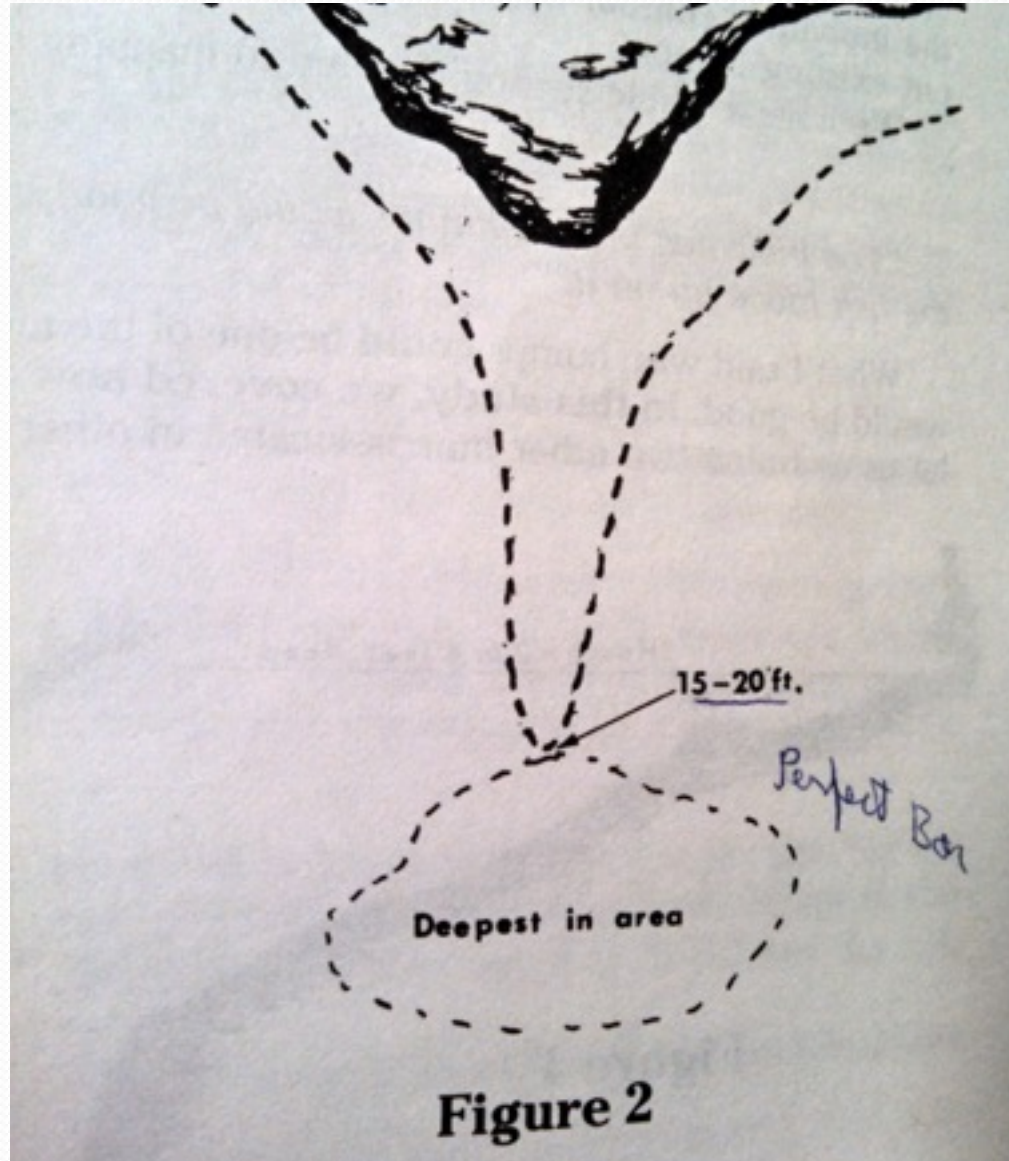
WORKING A BAR - Casting and Trolling



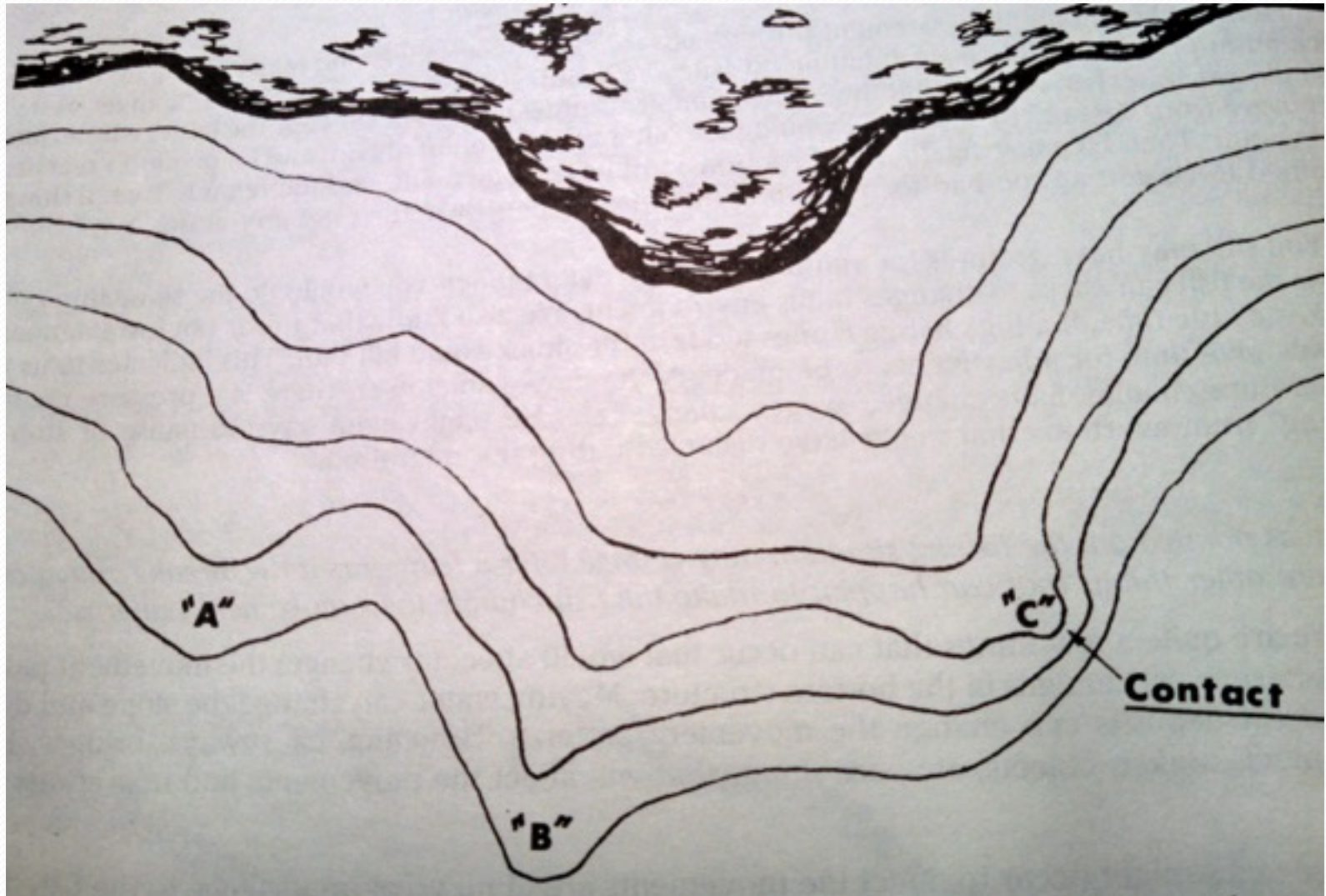
1. Follow contours in shallows to find structure (Contour trolling, < 10 ft)
2. Run straight line passes on deeper parts of pathway
3. Do a final pass from deepest water up onto structure
4. Anchor and cast shallow (A) and deep

Pass 4, Final Pass

THE PERFECT BAR

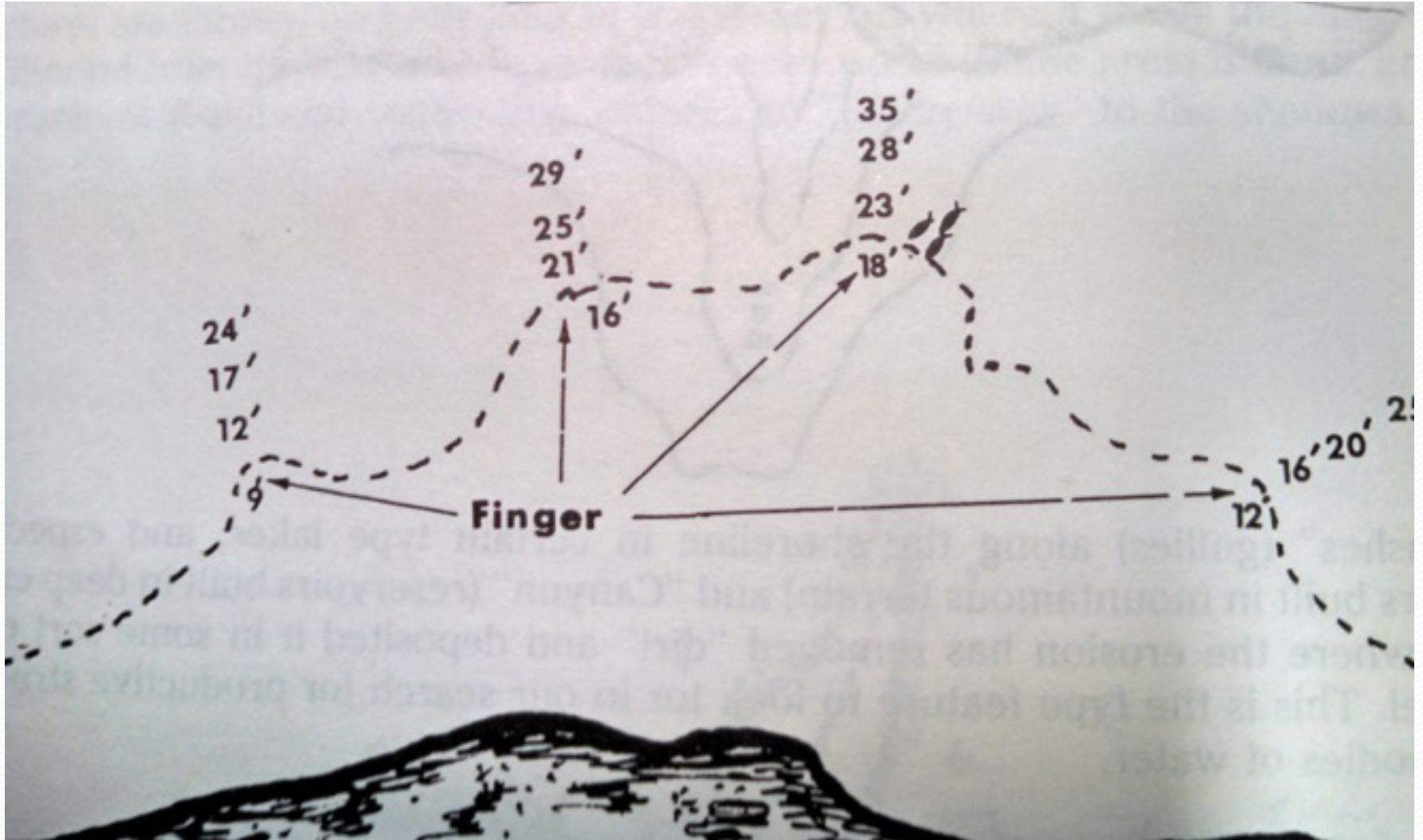


THE SHARPER BREAK



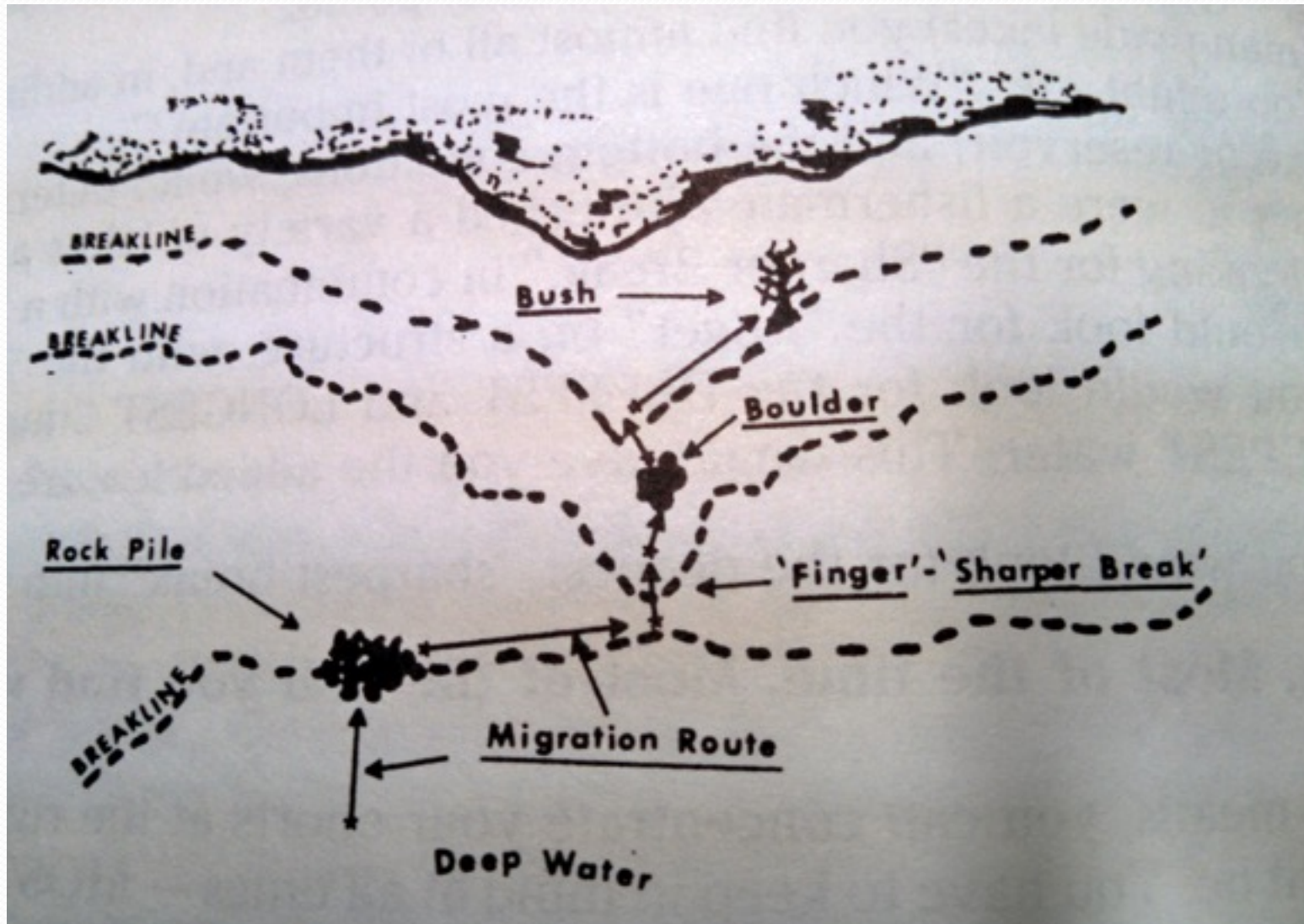
Contact Point= where fish first approach the structure from deep water

WIDE SWEEPING BAR



The deepest, sharpest break to the deepest water in the area

IRREGULAR PATHWAYS



Pathways rarely are in a straight line

FISH CAUGHT AFTER RETURNING TO A MAPPED STRUCTURE



After several attempts, a **school** of big flathead catfish was located on a **mapped** Grand River structure.

Known pathways should be **where** we **spend** the majority of our **fishing** time.

USE MARKERS TO SHOW FEATURES ON THE WATER



2 5-pound smallmouth from Lake Macatawa; Note marker indicating structure change

BUCK PERRY, THE “FATHER OF STRUCTURE FISHING” DISCOVERED TRUTHS ABOUT FISH BEHAVIOR MANY YEARS AGO



Buck Perry, 1915-2005

---Honored in Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame

---Considered one of the most successful fishermen that ever lived

---Once caught 33 bass on 33 consecutive casts, all over 3 pounds (Soap Creek, GA)

---First to design and build an electronic depth meter for sport fishing

---Had written numerous articles in many national fishing magazines

---Educational Editor for Fishing Facts Magazine for many years

---Author of book and 9-volume study guide, considered the most complete

FISH BEHAVIOR TRUTHS

SPOONPLUGGERS BASIC GUIDELINE

- A fish is a fish. Species are more **alike** than different
- The **home or sanctuary** of the fish is somewhere **in the deep** or deepest water in the area (30-35 feet)
- They are **normally dormant in their home**, but **once or twice a day will become active** and may move shallower
- The route (**pathway**) they take has **bottom features** (structure, breaks, and breaklines) that **show them the way**
- How **far they go**, and how **long they stay** is dependent on **weather and water conditions at that time**
- To **consistently catch fish**, we must **control the depth and speed of our lures or bait on and around the bottom features fish are using** in their movements

HOW DOES WEATHER AFFECT FISH BEHAVIOR?



COLD FRONT:

Bright sun + deep blue cloudless skies and fish go inactive. This instability gives **POOR FISHING!**

Why?

Because fish are designed to survive in a low light environment. Their eyes have no pupils or eyelids to adjust to light changes

AS MOISTURE BUILDS IN THE ATMOSPHERE, FISHING IS BETTER



Wide, continuous airplane contrails indicate moisture in the high atmosphere that benefits fishing

Several days of stable Florida weather yielded many fish

BEST FISHING IS WITH DARK, CLOUDY SKIES



Musky from Holland channel on dark, rainy day

MORE ON FISH BEHAVIOR

- Fish activity is **not triggered by hunger**. They all move at the same time on a given lake. Look for baitfish in the shallows.
- Fish **behave differently in shallows** (0-10 feet, scatter) than **deep water** (school up)
- Largemouth Bass are **universal** in distribution and the **most difficult to catch** because they react the most severely to weather changes
- Fish are **cold blooded**, and eat more and are more active in warmer water. The **hottest, muggiest day** of the year is **best**
- **Older and larger fish school tighter** and are more **reluctant to come shallow**
- **Depth and speed** are the main **triggers** for fish **striking**

DEPTH AND SPEED: ESSENTIAL!



Don Stephens

Two 6 pound bass, Hess Lake

9 foot breakline, breaking to 11 feet

Anchored on finger of previously mapped structure

Casting #200 Spoonplug (9-12 ft)

Warm water, very fast crank

Dark water, no weeds

Dark, cloudy skies mean stable light and good fishing

WATER COLOR (TURBIDITY) MAKES FISHING EASIER

- Fish **move shallower** and **stay longer**
- Shallower structure is **easier to map** and **present lures**
- **Fewer weeds** to interfere with presentation
- Use **noisy, flashy lures**. Fish can locate them with their lateral line
- Use **brilliant or dark colors** for visual contrast
- Look for **seasonal color changes** (e.g. algae bloom)
- Seek and **fish dark water**, especially on **cold front days**

GRAND RIVER, DARK WATER

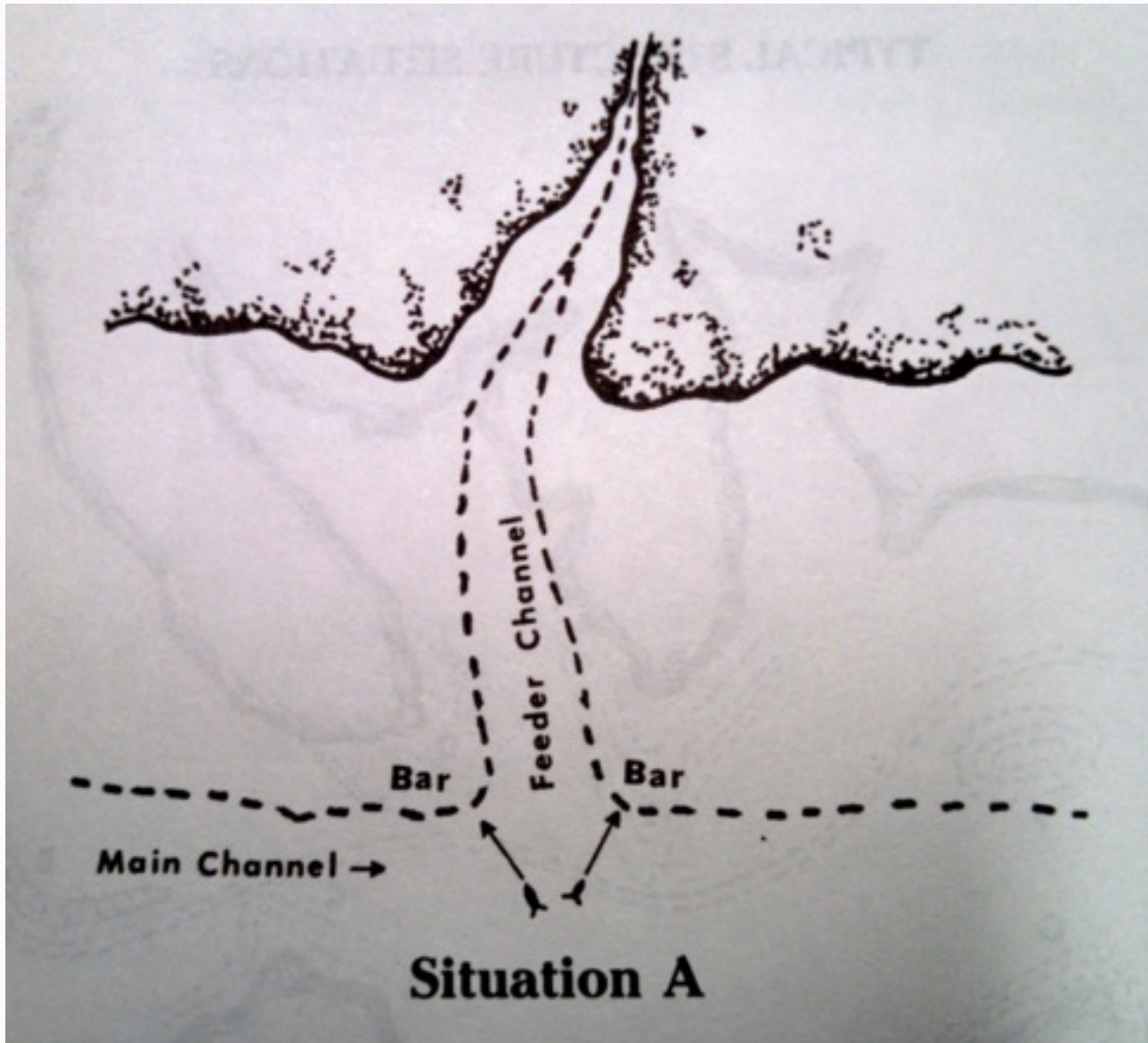


- Smallmouth bass
- Shallow structure
- Easy to map
- No weeds
- Caught casting jump lures while anchored
- Blade baits make noise
- Lures disappear in 2 feet

TARGET THE LARGEST FISH?

- **Big fish swim the fastest and are the most aggressive, so we always check the faster speeds**
- **Big fish are reluctant to come shallow, so we always fish a structure to as deep as it goes**
- **Each pathway that holds adult fish must lead all the way from the shallows to the deepest water in the area**
- **Big predators get the best lie, so we evaluate all structures to find the longest, narrowest, sharpest, deepest break to the deepest water in the area. In other words, the quickest retreat to the safety of the deep**
- **The largest waters usually hold the biggest fish**

KEY TO RESERVOIRS



Feeder cuts provide pathways in reservoirs, allowing fish to move from their deep water home along breaklines to the shallows

SMALLMOUTH, HARDY DAM



Anchoring and casting jump lures in deep water to contact points can be productive.

DETROIT RIVER MUSKIE



Deepwater trolling in current can be challenging, but also productive

50 inch muskie, #800 and wire, walking bottom in 32 feet in heavy current

LAKE MICHIGAN



25 pound carp
reacted to an artificial
lure (#800 Spoonplug)
walking bottom in 25
feet of water. Holland
Pier was the pathway to
shallows

LAKE ST. CLAIRE



John Bales with
nice smallmouth
caught trolling
Spoonplugs on
Lake St. Claire
at
edge of shipping
channel

MENTAL ADVANTAGE

- **Positive attitude** makes a **big** difference
- Pick a **proven approach** to fishing and **stick with it**
- **Belief** in what you are doing results in **persistence**
- **Knowledge is the key to fishing success** (Buck Perry).
There are **no magic lures or shortcuts to success**
- **Read and study** fishing; **There are no “experts”**
- Fishing is a **lifetime of learning**
- **Ask for help** from fellow fishermen
- **Take pictures of your catches** to **remotivate** yourself
- Understand that **fishing is a recreation: Have fun doing it!** **Involve your family in fishing.**

INVOLVE FAMILY



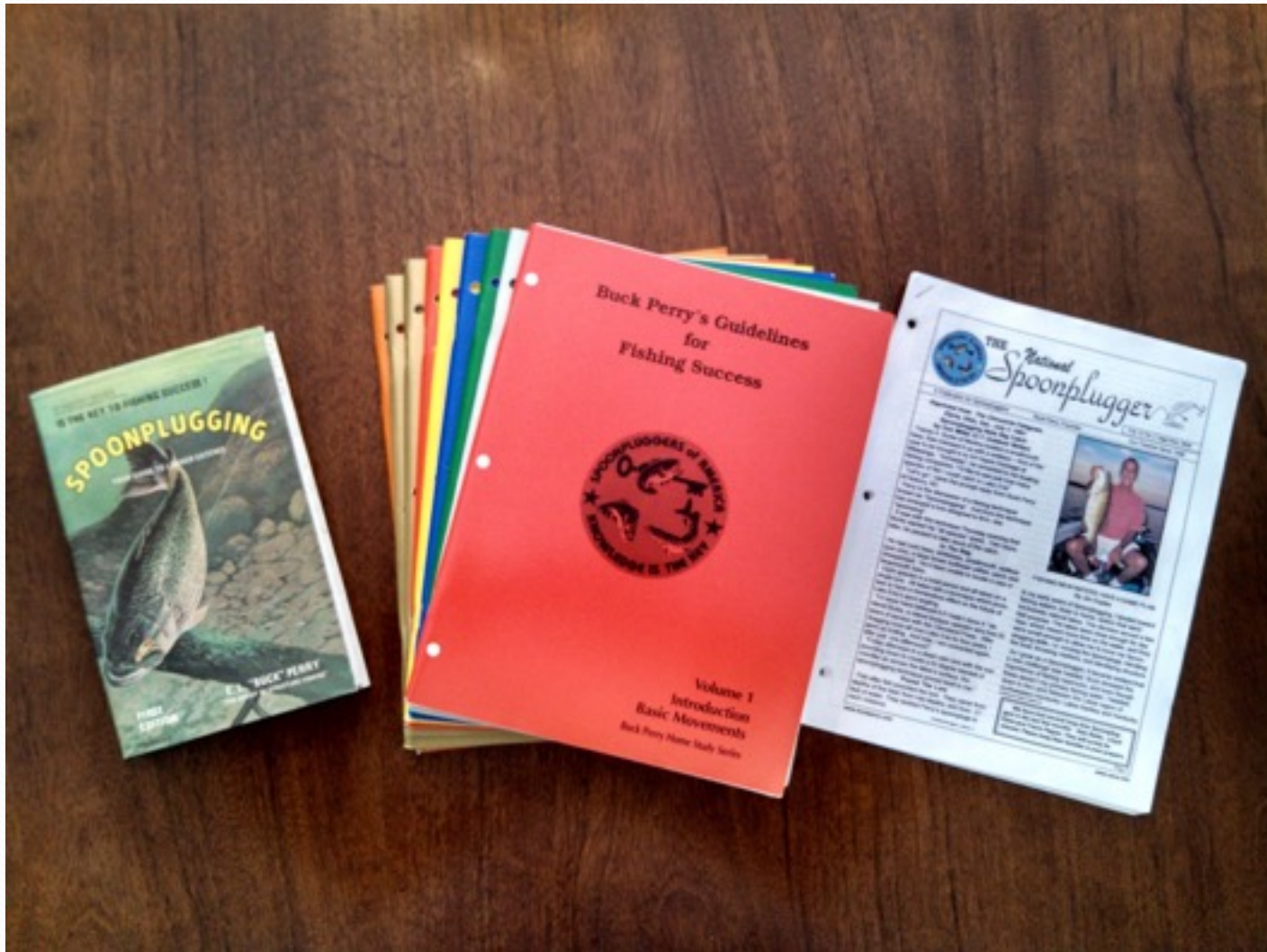
8 year old
granddaughter
landed 17 pound
King Salmon. What
a thrill!

BE PERSISTENT!



The snow was shoveled out and a bunch of big fish were caught on Reeds Lake

LEARN FROM THE BEST



“Green Book”

9-Volume “Guidelines”

Newsletter

SPOONPLUGGING SOURCES

- **BUCKPERRY.COM---**Lures, Spoonplugging equipment, study material
- **NSOA.INFO---**National newsletter, videos, articles
- **SPOONPLUGGER.NET---**Online forum
- **JOHNNYB-LURES.COM---**JB lures, bladebaits
- **STRUCTUREFISHING.COM---**Educational TV
- **CHASESFISHES.COM---**My educational website: pictures, history, articles
- **DON DICKSON FISHING VIDEOS---**Education

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