

“FISHING---FROM IZAAK WALTON TO BUCK PERRY”

Talk presented by Chase Klinesteker to the Grand Rapids Torch Club 1/11/00

FISHING HISTORY

Fishing has been around for a long time. Stone Age people used pencil shaped bone gouges as hooks and lengths of vine as line. Fishing is usually defined as the taking of fish, mostly as a recreation. A painting from Egypt (2000BC) shows an angler with a fishing rod. Both Plato and Aristotle mentioned angling. A Roman writer mentioned Macedonian trout anglers using feathered artificial flies with hooks. In 1496, Dame Juliana Berners wrote “A Treatyse of Fysshynge with an Angle” which gave specific details for the first time in English about the use of fishing rods, how to tie knots, and how to make and use artificial flies.

WHO WAS IZAAK WALTON?

Izaak Walton was an Englishman who, in 1653, wrote what became one of the most famous books in the English language titled “The Compleat Angler” or “The Contemplative Mans’ Recreation”. It was written as a conversation between Piscator, a fisherman, and Venator, a hunter. Piscator(Izaak Walton) converts Venator to the joys of fishing and teaches him how to catch fish. Waltons’ charming discourse on every aspect of fishing as a form of recreation is interspersed with dialogue, verses, songs, and idyllic glimpses of pastoral life. His writing style exudes serenity and contentment and his book remains as the foundation of the art of modern day fly fishing. It is a truly exceptional piece of literature. A fifth edition appeared in 1676 and included a supplement on fly fishing written by poet Charles Cotton, forming the second important part of the work.

Walton was born in Staffordshire, England in 1593. In 1624 he moved to London where he was a linendraper and ironmonger, retiring about 20 years later to Winchester. He was 60 years old when he wrote “The Compleat Angler” and lived to be 90, a likely example of the benefits of fishing. To show how popular this book has been over the years, and still is, it has more published editions than the Bible.

Through this book, Walton brought to the commoner access to a sport that was previously reserved for the aristocracy. His eloquent writing style and descriptive narrative gave the commoner a feeling of being a part of the aristocracy. This in part explains the outstanding success of his book and the popularity of the sport of fly fishing.

WHO IS BUCK PERRY?

Buck Perry started the modern era of fishing. His discoveries are the basic foundation of knowledge for all of fishing today. He is enshrined in the National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame with their highest honor, along with Izaak Walton, James Heddon, Dame Juliana Berner, Ole Evinrude, James Henshall, and others. He was one of the first to design and build an electronic depth meter for sport fishing. Over 50 years ago, this pioneer established concepts and terms about fish and their behavior that are still being “discovered” by others today. All fishermen today owe him a great debt and yet most do not even recognize his name.

Elwood L “Buck” Perry was born in Hickory, North Carolina on July 10, 1915. As a young boy, he was keenly interested in fishing, and spent much time fishing with his father. His early observations on fish behavior and how they relate to their environment were very advanced for any age. As Elwood grew, he was attracted to the study of science, math, chemistry, and physics, and graduated from Lenoir Rhyne College of Hickory, NC. . In college he was a star Quarterback at 155 pounds and played college baseball in 2 positions. He then did graduate work at North Carolina State University and became a physics and math teacher, as well as a college Physics Professor. During World War II he found himself teaching Diesel Engineering to Navy officers. In 1945 he went to Europe as a Lieutenant Colonel and supervised the

unloading and assembly of barges used in unloading ships. He returned home in 1946 and decided to devote his life to the teaching of fishing knowledge instead of returning to the academic world.

For 16 years from 1928 to 1944 Buck Perry had spent considerable time in intense observation of fish and their behavior doing countless experiments. These experiments were often done by diving underwater or observing from a glass-bottomed boat. All his basic principles and discoveries were completed by 1946. These were the observations of a keen mind trained in scientific methods. He had also designed “tools” to most effectively utilize the knowledge he had discovered to catch numbers of large fish from all sections and waters of the USA, Canada, and Mexico. These tools included properly designed rods, lines, and lures. In 1946 he started Bucks’ Baits in order to teach fishing and to supply those interested with the proper tools. With apparent ease he would catch numbers of large fish from thousands of lakes all around the United States and foreign countries. He selected those lakes known to be “fished out”, trying to teach fisherman the knowledge he had discovered. Over many years he astounded sportswriters (including Ray Bergman, Tom McNally, Grits Gresham, and Joe Stearns) with his huge catches of big fish, appearing in hundreds of newspaper articles. His method worked on all species of fish and in all lake types, rivers, and oceans. He took many celebrities fishing, including Bobby Jones, the famous golfer, several Governors and Cabinet members. He received a call from the White House one day: “We want you to take President Carter fishing”. Bucks’ reply was, “no way, I didn’t even vote for him”. He has been a guest on many local and national TV shows, his favorite was one he did with Dick Van Dyke. Articles about him have appeared in Outdoor Life, Field and Stream, Sports Afield, In-Fisherman, and Fishing Facts magazines. He wrote many articles for Fishing Facts Magazine and served as their Educational Editor for many years. He wrote “Spoonplugging-Your Guide to Lunker catches”, a 300 page book that condenses his discoveries. Spoonplugging was a term he used because the lure he designed was a cross between a spoon and a plug. It encompasses the whole body of knowledge he discovered, not just the lure. Later he produced an expanded 9 volume Study Guide and video tapes for those who wish more detailed study. His material could well be used in a college credit course on fishing. It is pure study material, unlike many writings in fishing today which are written for entertainment.

The biggest problem encountered in teaching his material was that most fishermen were looking for a “magic lure” and not interested in studying about fish behavior and how to use proper tools. He would take out resort owners or local “experts”, proceed to catch large numbers of fish, and then be told: “we just don’t fish that way”. He sold numbers of lures, but they would often be used improperly because knowledge was not acquired.

Currently, Mr Perry, at 84 years, still owns and operates Bucks’ Baits Inc. He also has an information site on the Web at www.americaoutdoors.com and is editor for a national newsletter serving over 35 Spoonplugging clubs around the United States. Although very busy, he still finds time to enjoy fishing and communicate with those interested in Spoonplugging.

WHY IS FISHING SO POPULAR?

Obviously, the writings of Izaak Walton have had a great influence. To relax and enjoy the outdoors, contemplate life, or enjoy solitude certainly are valid enjoyments for many. Today however, fishing appeals to a much wider array of interests. The eating of freshly caught fish is both healthful and delicious, and many people fish for food. Others enjoy the challenge of catching fish, and release most of what they catch. State and federal departments of fisheries have grown considerably, with hatcheries, promotions, and new exotic species being introduced. Fishing usually has a much longer season than hunting or many other sports, so enthusiasts can enjoy their activity almost year around. Fish are a renewable resource and the numbers available for catching usually far exceed anything that hunting has to offer. Today’s choices of species, waters, methods, and equipment are numerous. This gets more people interested, but often leads to confusion for many. Tournament fishing for money has greatly increased the interest in fishing, often benefiting the sale of boats, motors, and tackle. There is no question that fishing is one of the most popular

sports in the United States. When all is said and done, the answer to why fishing is so popular lies in watching young children enjoy fishing. The smiles, excitement, pride, and joy expressed by youngsters when they catch their first bluegill is never forgotten.

The question “Why do people fish?” could also be asked. The benefits mentioned above are all legitimate and can vary with each individual. However, there is one common reason all fishermen fish. That is TO CATCH FISH. Sometimes other benefits are given as an excuse for an unsuccessful trip. Unfortunately, most average fishermen only dream about catching adequate numbers of decent sized fish. It is these persons that can be truly helped by the knowledge that Mr Perry developed.

DO WE NEED “MAGIC” IN OUR LURES TO CATCH FISH?

The tackle sales promoters would like us to think so. The “Helicopter Lure” is a good example. These highly promoted and widely sold lures do catch some fish---when enough people buy and use them. As soon as sales and use decline, they become no better than any other lure. Logic tells us that there is no lure that fish will come swimming from all over the lake to grab. Besides, fish are nearsighted and can’t see much detail anyway. One of Buck Perrys’ guidelines states that depth and speed are the two most important controls in our fishing. In other words, we must get our lure(any lure) in front of the fish(depth), and move it at the speed to trigger a reflex strike by the fish. This becomes a challenge because fish change depth and require different speeds under different weather and water conditions. Also, when speeds are changed, most lures will change depth, and control is lost. We don’t need magic, we need to control the depth and speed of our lures where the fish are(structure). Knowledge is the key.

CAN WE “OUTWIT” THE FISH?

I would hope so! Fish have a pea-sized brain and are controlled by instinct, not the thinking process. Ants have a much larger brain relative to their body size than fish, yet are still controlled by instinct. They also are much more social than fish, yet we don’t attribute any special slyness to ants. Not understanding the facts about fish could lead to giving fish more credit than they deserve.

ARE THERE SIMPLE GUIDELINES TO HELP US CATCH MORE FISH?

This is what Buck Perrys’ book on Spoonplugging is all about. These Guidelines form an exact method or blueprint to catching more and bigger fish consistently. They involve scientific facts about fish, their behavior, and their environment put together in a way to help the average fisherman become more successful. Notice I did not say “magic” or “secret”. As with any skill, there is no shortcut to success. Study and practice is required. To utilize these guidelines in your fishing, one must study the material and get experience with it on the water. Success is relative to the thoroughness with which the guidelines are learned and experienced

Is there a condensed, simple statement that covers all of fishing one could use before reading the book? Yes. This is called the “Spoonpluggers Basic Guideline”. It involves the 8 essential areas of information covered by the guidelines:

1. MOVEMENT OF THE FISH
2. LAKE FEATURES—STRUCTURE, BREAKS, BREAKLINES
3. WEATHER AND WATER CONDITIONS
4. LAKE TYPES
5. MAPPING AND INTERPRETATION
6. CONTROLS AND TOOLS
7. PRESENTATION OF LURES
8. MENTAL ATTITUDE

The Spoonpluggers Basic Guideline states:

“The ‘home’ of the fish (where he spends the greater part of his time- a sanctuary from a changing or hostile environment) is somewhere in the deep, or deepest water in the area being fished. When in the sanctuary depths, fish are normally so dormant, and/or so deep they are almost impossible to locate or catch. As fishermen we are saved due to the fact the fish do not stay so dormant, or so deep all the time. Once or twice on an average fishing day they will become active and they MAY move toward shallower water. We are saved again, because when the fish become active and move towards shallower water, they do not go in just any direction. The route they take has bottom features (structure, breaks, breaklines) that show them the way. As the fish move along a bottom feature (structure) they will pause or stop at things (breaks and breaklines) on the bottom. How far they go (along a migration route towards the shallows) AND how long they stay (at a break or breakline before turning back to deep water) is dependent upon (controlled by) the weather and water condition AT THAT PARTICULAR TIME.

If you and I desire to consistently catch fish whenever or wherever we go fishing, we must control the depth and speed of our lures (or bait) on and/or around the bottom features (structure, breaks, breaklines) the fish are using in their movements and migrations.”

It takes a while for this statement (basic guideline) to sink in. It should be read, studied, and reread many times. This statement alone, if constantly applied on the water by the average fisherman, will dramatically improve results.

ARE THERE CERTAIN “TOOLS” WE SHOULD USE?

As with any skill or sport, tools that work best are designed to do a particular job. There is a great variety of fishing gear available in the stores today. Rods, reels, lines, lures, boats, motors, markers, anchors, nets, and depth meter are the most important ones. Each of these tools are looked at in relation to how they allow us to control the depths (shallow to deep) and speeds (slow to fast) of our lures to make fish strike. Recommendations are given for the best tools to use. Three of these tools (trolling rods, trolling lines, and free running-bottom bumping lures) are not available in the properly designed form, so Mr Perry manufactures them himself and sells them through Bucks’ Baits.

There are 2 ways to present lures: trolling and casting. Both are essential in thorough lure presentation. It is not a matter of what we like to do, but what we must do to become successful under all conditions. Most people can become good at casting fairly quickly, even if they learn in their backyard. Proper trolling is much more difficult to learn and requires skillful boat handling and knowledge of the study material. The rod, reel, and line requirements are different for trolling than casting. Study and practice with proper tools is essential to do any job most effectively.

WHERE DO WE FISH?

Determining where we fish in a lake is the most important skill we can develop. 90 % of the water contains no fish, so we must be very selective where we spend our time. From the Basic Guideline we know that fish have their migration routes on structure, an area of the lake bottom that is different from the surrounding area (eg bars, humps, reefs, islands, deltas, etc.). Mr Perry identifies 17 different structure situations which can produce fish and explains how each kind should be fished. The mapping and interpretation of structure is our guide to locating fish, and is the area where we can always get better. Trolling is the “teacher” that helps us learn the bottom of the lake.

CONCLUSION

Buck Perrys’ Spoonplugging is “cutting edge” fishing science. Over the years the fishing industry has gradually come to recognize much of the material this pioneer discovered over 50 years ago. Change comes slowly, especially of habits and traditions in fishing. There is much more of his material yet to be “discovered”. His knowledge about fish can be used to benefit any method or approach to fishing that exists. Come and learn in the new Millenium!