

Easter's Bait and Toby

By Robin Knowles

Eustis, Florida 1954 - My nose barely fit over the rim of the greenish concrete bait tank. By standing on my toes I was able to see the hissing jets of water that inspired my curiosity so. It was a mistake to be so inquisitive.

I dropped down off my toes and exclaimed, "Phew, that stinks." Indeed the whole inside of the dark, dank bait store carried that fish slime smell that makes me curl my nose even now. The inside of the fish tank at the rim was unbearably ripe and I turned my attentions to the garish display of brightly colored artificial lures.

Poppa didn't mind the smell; in fact I think it excited him for it meant that soon we'd be out on Lake Norris fishing in his favorite place. He didn't mind the smell of the bait tank, but then his nose was a good deal higher off the ground than my seven-year-old nose.

Poppa liked Easter's shiners for bait. Easter was the humpback black lady who ran the bait store. She hip-hopped; first on one short leg, then to the other shorter one when she greeted us, but she smiled a lot. She had a friendly, "Yuck, Yuck, Yuck" chuckle interjected into her black-speak that I did not understand but surely meant that she was good-natured. But Poppa understood her dialect, and when he asked for two dozen of Easter's finest shiners, she dutifully counted them out – out loud and put them into a galvanized pail that Poppa carried into the shop. Catching those shiners was a chore for Easter because she wasn't much taller than I was, and she had to stand on one leg and stretch as far as she could with the long handled net to catch them.

Poppa's favorite place to fish for bass was at the mouth of Blackwater Creek on Lake Norris. To get there from Easter's bait store we drove ten miles along a rural two lane road, then five more miles down an unpaved dead end country dirt road until we got to 'The Camp'. It sounds funny to say now because Florida is now in peril of being overrun with vehicles of one type or another, but when I was seven, it wasn't unusual for Poppa to drive that whole distance and never see another car on the road.

When we got to the camp, we bypassed the cabin and went straight to the boat. Poppa 'wore out' several boats in that ten year span, but for the most part they were wood, heavy and constantly waterlogged. All the boats that I can remember had a baitwell in the center with two hatches. A plywood divider separated the two sides. One side was for bait; the other was for bass to take home to eat.

Poppa put the plug in the back of the boat, for the boat was sure to be where he left it, if he left it in the half-sunk condition with the motor just above high water. Then he bailed the boat out until it floated. I asked questions, dumb little boy questions the whole time. From the time we left Easter's bait store until Poppa finally said to be quiet, I didn't stop. Even then, I kept asking questions. Little boys need to know things.

When the boat floated, and was ready to be pushed out into the windy lake, Poppa let me get in, pushed us out and started the old red Johnson outboard motor. It wasn't spring yet; winter hadn't let go and the black water of Lake Norris was cold and forbidding.

This day I was a Viking with a clumsy chunk of wood for a sword that Poppa let me keep. I was always a Viking, or a pirate, or a sea captain as I hid from the cruel winter's wind in the bow of Poppa's sixteen-foot wooden boat. If I wasn't one of these things, I was something else that was grand. I was always something other than a little boy, because it was great fun to imagine things. The bumpy chop of Lake Norris became giant imagined waves and would have been fearsome except that my Viking captain was a tough seasoned veteran of many such crossings. My fertile mind introduced icebergs and loch ness monsters for excitement as we completed the to the mile and a half destination at the south end of the lake. Occasionally, I would peer over

the prow to see how far we had yet to travel as the waves bumped the boat around and an occasional speck of spray splashed my red wind burned face.

The mouth of Blackwater Creek on Lake Norris is the perfect setting for high tales and remembered adventures, but it was a fishing place and we were there to fish, or so Poppa intended. Sometime after telling me for the twentieth time to quit thumping around with my sword, Poppa pointed out the remnants of the railroad trestles. I had never noticed them before.

“That’s where the train came,” he said.

“What train, Poppa?” He definitely had my attention when he said train. Trains, volcanoes, and swords were my three favorite things to talk about except perhaps for Robin Hood – after whom I was sure I was named.

“A long time ago,” Poppa said as he lip-hooked a shiner, “a lumber company came here and cut down all the cypress trees and hauled them to a lumber mill somewhere far away.”

Poppa stood, raised the spinning reel high above his head, and swung the rod tip back in a slow gentle arc. Then he reversed direction and arced it the other way as he aimed at the lily pads on the other side of the line of square topped rotting posts that were jammed into the muck in two parallel lines. At the top of the arc, he let the monofilament line slip off of his middle finger and the shiner, leader, and red and white bobber flew up and away over the posts to land with a satisfying plop and splash where he wanted his shiner to be. A gentle current took up where he left off and pulled the shiner towards the lilies. Poppa stopped the shiner just short of tangling in the lilies and sat down.

I didn’t have to ask, I knew. That was ‘the spot’ where he imagined that a huge largemouth bass would be waiting. Over to the right was a wicked snag about three feet down that had some razor sharp projections that we couldn’t see, but Poppa knew about them. I had learned that lesson on another trip. Poppa saw underwater obstacles and fishy looking spots the way psychics mysteriously divine murder clues. I waited a full minute before I asked about the train again. He’d started it. Now he had to finish the train story. A train was much more interesting than a red and white bobber.

No bass took his bait in that minute, so I asked.

“The train?” he said. “Oh yeah. Well, I don’t know too much about it. Mr. Ledford told me about it. Said it was just after the turn of the century, more than fifty years ago. He’s still upset about it. Said they cut down every cypress tree around the lake. It took years to do it because there were so many, but they took every one. Pond cypress doesn’t rot like pinewood does, so that’s why they wanted it.”

“How’d they get them on the train?” I wanted to know. The water was deep and frightening. “How did they get out into the water to cut the trees?”

“Don’t know,” said Poppa. He’d opened up a can of worms that had no bottom. “Probably had barges with poles to get around. The thing is, they cut down all the trees.”

“But Poppa,” I argued. “Look. There’s trees here now. They go on forever.”

And they did. Lake Norris is shaped like a short boot. We were fishing at the top of the boot where you put your foot in. The camp was halfway down the shin side. From one side to the other it was maybe a mile and a half wide, and from the heel to the top of the boot, it was maybe three miles or more. The setting for the camp was rare; it was on high ground. The rest of the lake was surrounded by cypress swamp. Almost everywhere else on the lake there was an irregular wall of cypress trees a hundred yards wide leading from wetland and swamp to deeper water where the trees couldn’t grow. There were thousands and thousands of trees there.

Poppa didn’t answer. He was in his psychic mode. He had a vision of a bass sniffing his shiner. The bobber teased him, he tensed up, then the bobber became still and he relaxed. He wasn’t going to tell me any more until he resolved the issue with his unseen fish. So I looked

around and began to see the trees where moments before I'd only seen the forest. When I looked, I noticed hundreds of lonely sad stumps sitting like stools with no centers. There were easily as many huge stumps as there were trees, maybe more. The stumps were different than the trees. The trees were tall. They were ready to declare an end to winter and sprout lacy green hand shaped cypress leaves as a tribute to spring. They were two to four feet across, and there were knees here and there. By comparison, the stumps were huge, four feet across, sometimes as wide as six or even eight feet across. No two were exactly the same, but most were hollow on the inside.

“Poppa, where’s the metal things that the train rides on?”

The red and white bobber was still, so Poppa heard me. “When they were through taking the trees, they took up the track, sometimes it’s called a rail, and left the cross-ties and supports behind. Look over there and you can see more of what it looked like. Mr. Ledford said that he and several other men took out the cross-ties where we are now and used them for lumber. They tried to get some of the supports out of the muck so they could get into Blackwater Creek to fish, but it was too hard. That’s why we can’t get the boat further up the creek. Maybe one day we’ll get a canoe and we can take it up the creek to where it crosses under the bridge.”

That was an idea I was willing to listen to, canoes meant Indians. I could be an Indian with a sword. I opened my mouth to ask another little boy question and the red and white bobber disappeared.

“Uh Oh,” said Poppa.

Poppa took every tiny bit of slack out of the line and then lifted the rod tip skyward in a fluid snatching motion. The rod bent double, the line got banjo string tight, and a huge swirl the size of a bathtub appeared in front of the lilies. Poppa’s rod dipped down and a foot of line clicked away from the spinning reel. Poppa had the drag so tight it was almost locked down. He lifted the rod, or tried to and the fish pulled back down. Neither the fish nor Poppa could pull any harder. I thought the rod would break, but it didn’t. It was a tug of war in the most classical sense of all. Poppa’s arms were tensed, his muscles showed and he couldn’t budge it. The drag gave another foot of line, then another. The line pointed at the invisible sharp snag near the crooked pilings. His drag was paying out more and more and then the line quit moving out. Another swirl, this time accompanied by a ‘sloosh’ then Poppa’s line got slack.

“Dang, they sure like that snag,” said Poppa. Poppa had lost a lot of fish near that snag. Whatever it was, it was complex in shape and had sharp corners and angles. “I don’t know what’s down there,” Poppa said as he re-rigged his rod, “but the fish like to hide in there and there’s some really big ones. Every once in a while I can pull them out before they get wrapped around the sharp corners. That was a good one.”

“Poppa, why is the water so black and dirty,” I asked. I meant to ask if he knew anything about Indians and canoes, but it seemed to me that if the water was clear we could see the snag and maybe he could fix it so he wouldn’t lose so many fish.

“There’s tannin in the cypress leaves,” he said. “In the wintertime all the leaves fall off the trees and into the water. The tannin is like dye; it turns the water brown like tea over near the camp. Here it gets darker like coffee. It isn’t really dirty. The tannin in the leaves is slightly acidic and it helps make the water soft. That’s why there’s no algae in the water and that’s why you kids don’t get swimmer’s ear in the summertime when you swim in front of the camp. It won’t ever get clear like Silver Springs or those other places. The fish like it because it gives them cool places to hide near the bottom near the tree stumps.”

Poppa finished putting his rig together, hooked another shiner and flipped it back out across the skeleton of the railroad trestle and near the lilies. Almost immediately, the bobber slipped under and Poppa set the hook. This time he got a thrashing splashing black bass away from the

snag. I noticed that he ‘played’ the bass until the bass seemed to be compliant and Poppa could lead him through the maze of supports that has once been part of a railroad track.

Poppa reached into the water and put his fingers into the gills of the bass then lifted it clear of the water so I could see it. He only held it up for me to see for a moment, then dropped it into the other side of the baitwell – the side that had water and no bait.

He soon caught another bass and added him to the baitwell. Then he caught a mudfish and was getting ready to let him go, when I noticed something about thirty yards away.

“Poppa, is that a beaver?” I asked. It looked like a beaver. I’d never seen a real life beaver, but I’d seen pictures.

Poppa was still extracting the hook from the mudfish and looked over his shoulder. “Uh OH, that’s Toby. Toby is an otter. They’re fun to watch, but they’re mischievous. Keep your eyes peeled, maybe you’ll see another one.” He didn’t explain what ‘mischievous’ meant. Nor did he tell me why the otter was named Toby.

I watched the otter as Poppa fished and it seemed to me that it might be fun to be an otter. The otter knew we were there, and likely it was as curious about me as I was about it. It was very fast; making a vee wake behind it as it swam around. It was brownish-black and sleek and shiny. It climbed up on a stump and looked intently at me, then raced between the uprights of the long gone railroad playing some imaginary game. I’d never seen a water mammal before and I was fascinated. I wanted Poppa to watch too, but he had a fish to play with.

“Uh OH.”

Poppa had a fish. He had a big fish. This time, the fish didn’t manage to pull the line into the snag that was sharp and mysterious. This time the fish had to fight Poppa on Poppa’s terms. This time, Poppa got the fish far enough away from the snag to fight him in the swimming pool sized arena behind the old railroad pilings. Even then, Poppa didn’t tempt fate by bringing the big fish to the boat. He wanted him tired and out of fight when he began to thread the eight-pound or so fish to the boat through the pilings.

Just as the fish seemed ready, a sleek brown flash streamed through the pilings like a torpedo and headed for Poppa’s bass. One moment Poppa’s fish was out of fight and ready to give in and then the next moment Poppa’s rod dipped down and bent double again.

“Uh Oh,” said Poppa sorrowfully, “I think Toby is going to take my bass.”

The fight didn’t last long. The otter knew what was under the lilies that Poppa only imagined. Down, under and through and then as if a sharp knife had cut it, Poppa’s line parted. Ten seconds later, Toby climbed carefully onto a log just behind the lilies and looked at us. He had Poppa’s bass clenched firmly in his mouth. He knew he was a thief, and Poppa knew it too, but Poppa didn’t cuss him for it.

“Time to go home,” said Poppa. “You steer the boat and I’ll clean the fish on the way home.”

As Poppa was cleaning his bass, I shouted a question to him over the mellow whine of the Johnson outboard, “Poppa, does Easter know about Toby?”

It took Poppa a moment to understand what I was asking. In an adult to adult manner he replied, “No, I don’t think she does. The next time we go to her store to buy bait, why don’t you tell her about Toby?”