

Carter's Heaven,

WHERE A BLIND HOG FINDS AN ACORN EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE!



By Jackie Howell

As a young boy in the mid 1950s, my father would take me to Fitzhugh Carter's "Chain Lakes" to fish. Mr. Carter's tract was blessed to have a group of lakes which are the headwaters of Pine Log Creek. Pine Log crosses SR 20, which runs east and west, and then SR 79, which runs north and south. It flows on into the East River, ultimately merging into the Choctawhatchee River. Mr. Carter charged the public \$1.00 to fish, and you could launch your own boat or use one of his old skiffs made from the cypress trees found in his wetlands.

The trip always seemed to take hours, when it was really only about 30 miles north of Panama City. I could barely see out the window of our 1950 Buick Roadmaster with the "Dynaflo" transmission, but I always remember Mr. Carter's black 1948 Ford F-1 pick-up and its black and white hog painted on the truck's doors on both sides. Even at ten years of age, that truck certainly appealed to me.

If the truck wasn't in its usual parking place, it meant that I had to keep a lookout for Mr. Carter. He would always fuss at me for walking on the steep banks of the canal when I was fishing. He was concerned that the foot traffic would erode the earthen dams and spillways he had worked so hard to erect around the lakes. I loved to fish for the big jacks (chain pickerel) that hung out behind the spillways and the creeks that connected the lakes. The best way to access these areas was to sneak along the banks in stealth mode, stalking the jacks with a perfect cast from my rod and reel.

Mr. Carter designed and excavated small creeks from the top lakes to the next level, then built more spillways which terraced down to Pine Log Swamp. My dad told me "Never go back into the swamp, because some man had gotten lost in there and it took him three days to find his way out." That got the attention of a ten year old, because the spooky swamp looked like it went on forever, and as far as I was concerned, it did!



Mr. Carter surveying one of the canals he dug between his many ponds located on the property. Photo courtesy of Florida Wildlife Magazine, who used it in their April 1960 article. It also appeared in *Land and Water* magazine, Sep-Oct 2007.



These Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission boat registration plates from 1949, 1950, 1952 and 1953 were removed from several of Mr. Carter's cypress fishing boats used on the property.

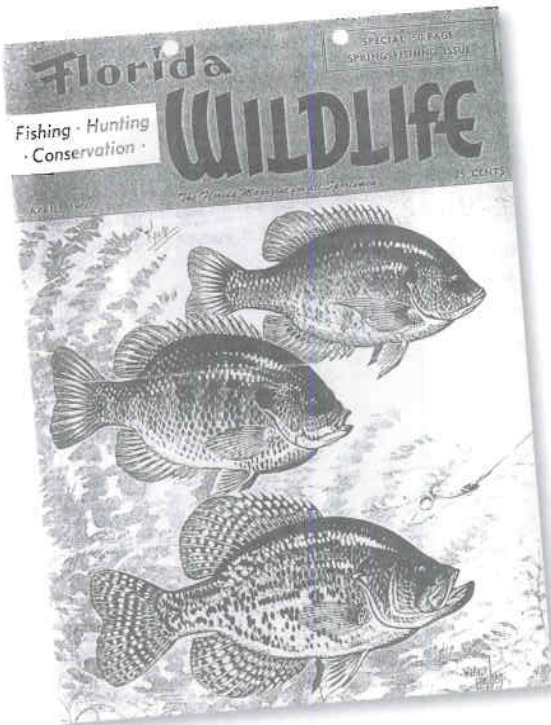
Mr. Carter furnished free boats at all the lakes, and he had picnic tables and old style hand water pumps, which offered the best cold water that I have ever had! Dad would always tell me, "fill up the coffee can" (that was by the pump), for prime for the next guy. I remember my favorite jack bait was a yellow and black tiger color Hawaiian Wiggler sweetened with a chunk of Uncle Josh green spotted pork rind. It was as if the jacks would talk to one another about the tasty bait! After discovering this combination, each time I went up to "Carter's Heaven" (as I called it) and would throw that big glob of a bait, those jacks went into a frenzy. My dad never liked me calling it "Carter's Heaven" though, because he said "God wouldn't like it". But I was sure HE did!

As I got older, I fished all over northwest Florida, but would always think about the fun and the feeling I used to get finding arrowheads, Indian pottery, and catching those big jacks. They had to be 4 feet long with 2 inch razor sharp teeth. Even a picture of one weighed 2 pounds! At least that was the way I remembered it...

In the early seventies, I returned to Carter's Heaven and talked to Mr. Carter. As luck would have it, he still had the old "hog truck". It took me several trips, and really a lot more social drinking than I would have liked, but he finally agreed to sell

Jackie Howell's memories of Mr. Carter's "hog truck" are captured in this old F1 Ford pickup. It is believed that the truck purchased by Jackie from Mr. Carter, is the same \$50 truck mentioned in the *Florida Wildlife* article.





The April 1960 issue of *Florida Wildlife* featured Mr. Carter's grand fish and wildlife management project, and is reprinted in its entirety with the kind permission of Ms. Kelly Broderick, Editor.

me the old truck, and I was a happy camper!!! Mr. Carter cautioned me that the truck didn't run, but "had good brakes". I knew the trip back to town was going to be scary, but my friend Danny Derby agreed to tow me home. In spite of having to veer into the ditch for several emergency stops, the truck made the trip with only some mud on the front and undercarriage from checking out the crawfish population. When I returned home, my wife Teresa said, "you bought a truck with a HOG painted on both doors?" From her reaction, I deduced that the old truck really didn't impress her nearly as much as it did me.

While cleaning out the truck, she and I noticed there were a couple of old metal tackle boxes and a leather bag tucked under the seat. The boxes and bag were crammed full with plugs. As excited as I was to find them, I thought about it overnight and I knew I had to go back and return them to Mr. Carter. The next day, I drove up to Carter's Heaven and told him about my discovery. He said, "Hell, they were in the truck weren't they?" I said, "Yeah, but I thought you might want them back." I told him I had brought them with me, and he said, "Go get them and I'll show you the one my wife caught the 13 lb. 8 oz. lunker on."

We talked about all the old lures, did some more social drinking, and he insisted on my keeping the plugs, since he was getting too old to fish anyway, and they had been in the truck for at least twenty to twenty-five years. Another thirty years went by, and I decided to sell the lures in order to purchase another truck, this time a 1989 Toyota pick-up with very low mileage, in mint condition. It only seemed fitting that the lures came with an old truck, and would help me buy another old truck. I was referred to Steve Cox by mutual friend Nick Patronis, and after some negotiations, we struck a deal. Steve seemed most attracted to Mr. Carter's handmade bait that caught the big bass, and to a rough blue and silver darter with glass eyes. He explained why the darter was so special, and that gets me to the sub-title of the story. **That old blind hog of a truck had more than just one acorn in it!**



Fishhook Carter's fishing ranch is made up of 30 ponds spread out over 2,300 acres.

For a small fee, you
have 30 ponds to
try your fishing luck on . . .

Florida's Fishing Ranch

By MEL TENNIS, JR.

SCHOOL TEACHERS AND FISHERMEN must have faith. They also must have patience, must be practical and not afraid of hard work.

Find a practical school teacher whose problem is to find the fishing in lures and anything can happen. It has.

It's a 2.5/6-acre fishing ranch made from some 30 ponds linked by canals 10 miles south of Wauson in Washington County.

It's the property and Bobby-turned-vegan of Fitzhugh Carter, 52, who retired from teaching at Vernon High School in 1957.

Dry Pond is the largest and gave the most trouble. Its 1,000-acre stretch for over a mile now taking in the 10 Green Ponds partially lost among the sandhills.

The system is fed by Pinelog Creek and ultimately drains into the Choctawhatchee River, 15 miles west.

The ex-schoolman thunders fishes.

If you should fail to catch any fish, you get a "rain-check" and can try your luck some other time.

men \$1 each to fish in any of the ponds 5 a.m. until 8 p.m. They can also hunt game in season at no extra charge. Of course they must have a valid Florida fishing or hunting license. Visitors may picnic free during the day but are not allowed to camp overnight.

If you should be so unfortunate as not to catch any fish, you get a "rain-check" to try your luck again on the house.

Miles of trails—Carter doesn't know how many—winding through the sand hills are marked with signs and arrows at intersections, but if you're not careful you can get lost.

At least that's the way it seemed to me.

I know my way around half a dozen big cities, but this fishing ranch in southern Washington County baffles me. Ponds pop into view in the unlikelyst places, over a rise or around a bend, and they stretch back under the trees all over the place.

To link up all of the ponds, canals meander all over the place like a Venice in the sand hills laid out by Rube Goldberg, the cartoonist.

This pioneer do-it-yourself conservationist readily admits that his fish-

(Continued on Next Page)



(Continued From Preceding Page) ing ranch is a kind of crazy, handmade job, but—what is strange and wonderful in these inflationary times is it's not financed. His 2,300 acres of sand and water are not in hook to some lending institution. Carter is a pay-as-you-go-type. The only people off and on his payroll for the past ten years have been the dragline man and the bulldozer operator. They'd be working long enough to use up his spare cash and would come around again the next month for more.

The canals, dikes, dams and spillways connecting and controlling the water in the ponds makes a bewildering pattern, but it works. The proof is in the fishing.

While we stood at the edge of Dry Pond—which Carter trusts will never be dry again—a couple of air-men fishing from a boat held up a big bass that looked like it weighed seven or eight pounds. Carter said that it's nothing unusual to pull in five and six-pound bass and that the largest ever landed weighed 13½ pounds.

Other fish caught are blue gill, shellcrackers, crappie, warmouth and jackfish. With the help of Jerry Banks from the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's office in Panama City, Carter stocked his first pond in 1951 with bass, blue gill and shellcrackers. His procedure was to get the rough fish out and restock before any pond was connected to the system of ponds and canals.

First he would seine out all the fish he could in a lake then would poison to be sure they were all out.

Carter related that some biologists can tell a male bass from a female but that he didn't know how. As it turned out it didn't make a lot of difference. He'd put in two or three dozen adult fish and they knew who were males and females. It was no problem for the fish. The ex-school teacher gave them an "A" in multiplication.

He has set aside several small lakes as hatcheries to produce fingerlings for restocking any lake that gets low.



The 30 ponds are all linked by a series of canals.

"I fooled with this 'cause I wanted to fish," he explained, adding that the high water in 1940 gave him the idea of holding all the water in the ponds.

Born a mile away he had watched the ponds wax and wane all his life. In the years after a rainy season the ponds would be brimming full and the fishing was good. Then the drought would come. The ponds would shrink to mere potholes and Carter would have to go far to indulge his favorite pastime.

Dry seasons particularly rendered Dry Pond and the Green Ponds wretched for fishing because their natural source of water, Pineog Creek, had been diverted to supply Dykes Old Mill Pond ever since 1873.

As long as the ground remained full of water after heavy rains, the ponds would remain full. Once the subsurface water drained away as happened during dry years, the water in Dry Pond would gurgle down a big sink hole as if someone had pulled the plug out of an enormous bathtub. The only way to keep Dry Pond permanently wet was to plug the hole.

In the 1940's Dykes grain mill shut down and the Old Mill Pond was abandoned. It was then that the

Vernon school teacher decided to turn the creek back to its original course to nourish Dry Pond and the 10 Green Ponds.

The first step was to acquire land. Carter bought his first 300 acres of poor worthless land in 1941 at an Internal Improvement Fund auction. His top bid was \$5 per acre. In heriting 400 acres from his father, Carter had accumulated 2,300 acres by 1954.

There was a flood in 1948 but by November 1954, it looked like north Florida was well into a dry season, Carter recalled. Though Dry Pond and the Green Ponds were still full, there was no telling how much longer the underground waters would remain as a safeguard against Dry Pond suddenly draining into the earth.

Invisibly and silently one Thursday in November mother nature pulled the plug on Dry Pond. The thousand-acre pond began to sink from sight at the rate of one foot a day. By Sunday it had gone down four feet. Hurriedly Carter bulldozed an earthen dam across a narrow part of Dry Pond to hold the waters back from the sink, but that

was only a strategic retreat to gain time.

The bulldozer cautiously shoved earth and stumps into the big hole but that did no good. Water could be seen sinking in the hole 15 feet down. And to make things more difficult, Carter couldn't find a dozer operator who was willing to take on the hazardous job of driving a 30-ton machine to the very edge of the big hole.

"I'm going to fill it up if I have to haul rocks in with a wheelbarrow," Carter declared as he and Jerry Banks made plans to shoot the works.

Finally finding a grizzled veteran dozer operator who had gouged roads up and down the Rocky Mountains and who sported his scorn of the sink hole, Carter and Banks decided to go-for-broke.

They got a case of dynamite, lit two long fuses, dumped it in the sink and ran for cover.

It went off with one hell of a roar! The whole swamp shook, they related, as 45 dead fish popped to the surface.

Thirteen and one-half hours later the Rocky Mountain bulldozer man

had scraped thousands of tons of earth and a kind of limestone goo found around the area into the bothersome hole. He filled it in and for good measure triumphantly rode his machine back and forth on top of the hole to make sure the plug was tight.

Rental of the bulldozer was \$135, the best investment he ever made Carter says.

With the hole plugged up Carter went ahead with diverting Pinelog Creek back to its original course to supply Dry Pond and the Green Ponds. To do this he put a dam with spillway and a dike between Dykes Old Mill Pond and Dry Pond.

To let his bulldozer man know how high to push up the dirt for the dam and dike, the backwoods engineer cut off cypress saplings at the water's edge at the height he wanted. Then he stuck old empty oil cans on the stobs and all the dozer man had to do was shove the earth to the height of the cans.

Carter said that people called him 'pond-crazy' for putting his life savings and most of his income into the project. However, he had no children to dot on and he and Mrs.

Carter were thrifty in their habits as most country people are.

Some of the canals cut 15 to 20 feet deep through the sand hills give the impression that much expensive dragline work was done. Visitors shake their heads over how it was accomplished by one school teacher in his spare time.

Carter said that it wasn't as difficult or as expensive as you might think. "The water level in one of the lakes would usually be higher than it was in the other. So we'd scratch the surface just enough to make the water flow and then the water itself would cut through the sand and do a lot of the work." Most of this kind of work would be done when the ponds were very full.

He made the water work in another way. Lily pads clogged the 75-acre Dykes Old Mill Pond so thickly that fishing was impossible. With the aid of his dams, dikes and spillways, Carter raised the water level in the pond a couple of feet over the big bonnets, killing them and making the surface clear once more.

(Referring to his project as a
(Continued on Page 43)



Above: Two of Mr. Carter's many boats made of cypress cut from the Chain Lakes swamps. They still occupy their last mooring, mired in the mud along a lake shore. Note the heavy application of tar used with caulking material to seal up the seams in the boards.

Below: The Fitzhugh Carter Tract's on-site Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC) staff, Ms. Kelly Bunting, Biological Scientist (left) and Ms. Lori McIntosh, Wildlife Technician (right), are pictured outside their office.



This 1981 photo, taken by Mr. Carter's wife Essie, features Mr. Carter at the controls of his new Oregon Mills Mobile Dimension Saw, which he purchased with the assistance of Mr. William Cleckley (center). The saw mill allowed for the numerous stands of mature cypress, aged from 250 to 375 years old (according to core samples taken by NFWFMD biologists) to be cut on site for the many bridges, dikes, dams and retention walls needed on the property. Mr. Cleckley's father, James Robert Cleckley, is pictured on the right. The Cleckleys were neighbors of Mr. Carter, and William, now Director of the Division of Land Management and Acquisition, Northwest Florida Water Management District (NFWFMD), still owns property adjacent to the Fitzhugh Carter Tract. Photo courtesy of Mr. Bill Cleckley, NFWFMD.

Anglers visiting Florida's Fishery ranch will find good quantities of bass, bluegills, shell-crackers, crappie, sunnyside, and chain pickers.

An intricate system of dikes, dams, and spillways is used to maintain water levels.



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FISH RANCH

(continued from page 25)

'cheap-type operation,' Carter listed his own tools as a sawmill, an old truck he picked up for \$30 and a jeep. He traded an old sugar cane mill for the saw mill and cut his own timber for dams, bridges, spillways, benches and boats.

Most of the 59 boats seen around the ponds he made himself. He doesn't rent boats and visitors use them at their own risk. Some sportsmen bring their own boats. It's possible to take a scenic fishing trip for miles from one end of the chain of lakes to the other via the canals.

By setting out a few thousand pines each winter, Carter has reforested about 200 acres in recent years. He anticipates that turkey, squirrel and quail will become more plentiful as natural cover increases.

The season is always closed on deer. The ones seen on the ranch are just passing through, he said, though the entire ranch is surrounded by 10 miles of fence which he put up.

Wild ducks and geese sometimes visit the area. To encourage them to make it a habit he plans to do some planting to supplement the natural food supply.

Otter live in the ponds and canals and their tracks can be seen in numerous spots. The season is always closed on them. Carter has always been very fond of the little animals.

The Washington County fish rancher thanks State and U. S. wild-

life officers, the Soil Conservation Service, Agricultural Extension Service and other public agencies for their advice and help in planning the project. A number of those officials feel that he is pioneering a new way to make profitable use of unproductive lands and that his project might be duplicated in a number of areas in Florida.

Others question whether Carter's ponds will hold their water in a sustained drought when underground water is gone and porous limestone passages dissolve or fall away. Carter who knows the limestone sink country from long, hard, intimate experience is reasonably confident of the future. He is going ahead this year with stocking a new lake with fish and adding it to his collection.

He is betting his life savings against old mother nature who might have a trick or two up her sleeve. If she tries to put him out of business, he's sure he can counter punch with a few cases of dynamite and a bulldozer. ●



"Any luck?"

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FATC News acknowledges the invaluable assistance of a number of different people and agencies in compiling this article. Mr. William Cleckley, Ms. Faith Eidsa, and Mr. Robert Lide of NFWFMD, Ms. Kelly Broderick of Florida Wildlife magazine, Ms. Shanna Egli of Land and Water magazine, Ms. Kelly Bunting & Ms. Lori McIntosh of FFWCC, and Mr. Steve Carter, Mr. Fitzhugh Carter's nephew, who still resides on the property.

LEESBURG

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ NATIONAL BASS TOURNAMENT

BY RICK OSTERHOLT

It wasn't the first national fishing contest, but it may have been the first **National Bass Fishing Contest** ever documented.

The 1928 tournament in Leesburg Florida was a huge success, according to William Kennedy's *A History of Lake County*, which was published in 1929. Mr. Kennedy wrote: "This Fresh Water Bass Tournament is tending to turn more interest and attention to Leesburg and this section of Lake County than has hitherto been manifested, and the winter finds many who entered the tournament in 1928, already making plans for the 1929 Tournament."

Leesburg started the idea with a tournament in 1927 for Florida residents. It began on November 1st, and ended on November 30th, 1927. With the success of the state tournament, the tournament committee, chaired by city manager D.E. Bovines, decided to put together a national tournament for out of state guests to boost tourism in the area. Unlike tournaments of today, which last for 2-4 days and weigh five fish for a cumulative weight, this tournament had several categories for fisherman to strive for, and lasted for two months!

Prizes were awarded for the largest catch in each category. Some of the categories were: largest bass caught on 16

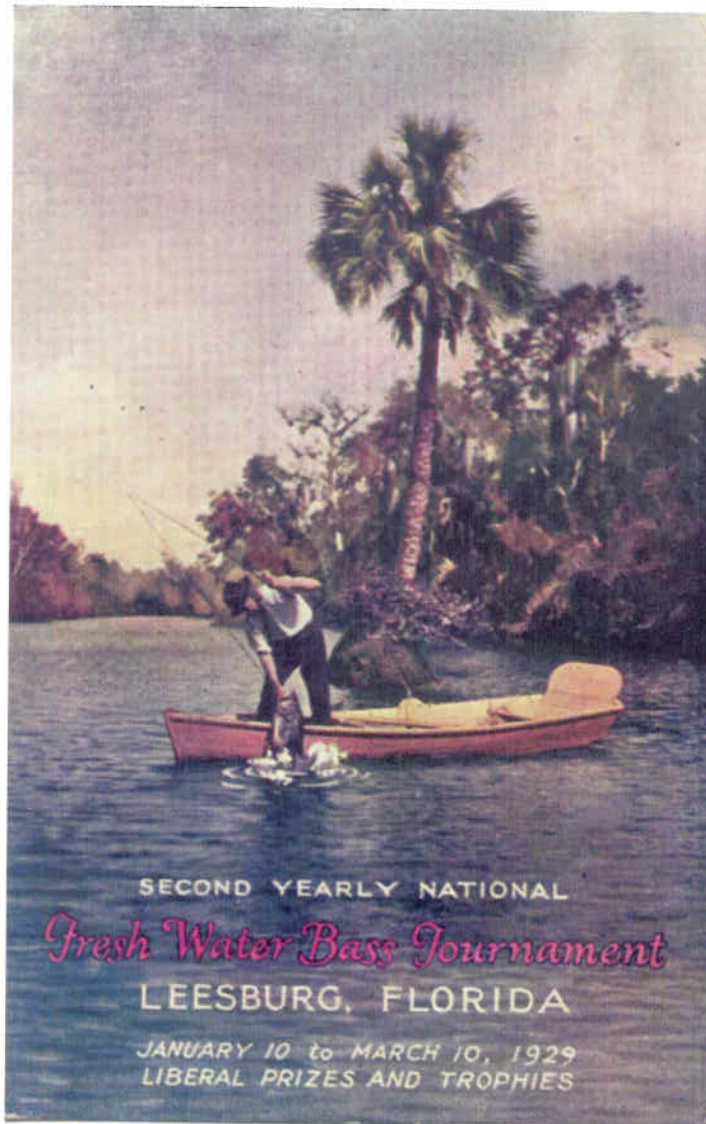
pound test, largest bass caught on fly rod and reel, and largest bass caught while trolling. The National Tournament

started on January 10th, 1928, and ended on March 10th, 1928. Twenty-two trophies were awarded to fourteen fishermen, representing eight states, according to the *Leesburg Commercial* in March of 1928. Along with the trophies, the prizes included a folding boat, Heddon, Shakespeare, and Pflueger tackle.

To enter the tournament, participants had to register with the city, and prove they were an out-of-state resident. In order to weigh a fish, the contestants needed to pay a \$1.00 entry fee, and bring the fish to the Leesburg Fire Station for the weighing. Amazingly, in 1928, the winning bass was caught on the last day of the tournament by J. B. Shick of LaPorte Indiana, tipping the scales at 12 lbs. 8 oz. "Mr. Shick used a Heddon reel, Heddon rod, 16 pound test line, and a Wilson Spoon, and caught it trolling" according to the *Commercial*. George Miller caught a bass weighing 14 lbs. 4 oz. during the tournament on February 29th, 1928. However, the bass

was disqualified since George, formally of Philadelphia, had transferred his residence to Florida before the catch.

During the 2nd Annual Leesburg National Bass Tournament in 1929, the largest bass caught while casting an artificial bait,



was won by W.E. Brown of Corning, NY. Mr. Brown's bass weighed in at 10 lbs. 12 oz., and was caught on a Creek Chub Plunker with a Shakespeare reel. Shick, the 1928 winner, came back strong in 1929. He recorded the largest bass taken on 16 pound line or less, weighing 9 lbs. 4 oz. Shick caught the fish with a Heddon rod and reel on a Skinner pork rind bait.

Women were also encouraged to participate. In the state tournament, held in late 1927, Mrs. Otto Cisky won a \$25 Pflueger reel for the largest bass caught at 11 lbs. 6 oz. Mrs. J.W. Atkinson of Chicago won first prize in The National event in 1928. She landed a 9 pound bass on a bamboo pole and live bait.

News of the tournament swept across the United States, and by 1930, the tournament drew 2000 contestants from thirty-eight states. The prizes in 1930 also helped lure fishermen from around the country. First prize in the "Class A" category, largest fish caught on an artificial bait on 12 pound line, was a King Folding Boat donated by King Boat Company, Oakland, California.

Other prizes included Pflueger reels, Shakespeare reels, Heddon Triple Teazer lure assortments, 15 assorted Shannon Spinners, and a six-pack of Creek Chub lures. Keep in mind that contestants had to be from out of state, and they could only fish in Lake County Florida, with the St. Johns River and Lake Apopka as exceptions. The Chamber of Commerce must have done a terrific job marketing the tournament to the northern states!

Shick did it again in 1930, catching the largest bass on an artificial lure with 12 pound line. His catch weighed an impressive 10 lbs. 12 oz. The largest bass on any weight line went to Glen Poehner for his catch of 8 lbs. 12 oz. Even though Schick's fish was larger, Poehner had entered it in the latter category, so Poehner did not have to compete against Schick.

The National Tournament was planned to continue in 1931, but never came to be, as the great depression took it's toll.



Above is shown J. B. Shick, of La Porte, Indiana, a prize-winner each year of the National Fresh Water Bass tournament. Mr. Shick won grand award in Class A, for largest bass taken with artificial bait, on 12 pound or lighter line. Mr. Shick's bass weighed ten pounds twelve ounces.

An old newspaper clipping of Mr. J. B. Shick and one of his many award winning bass taken in the Leesburg tournaments.

However, the three year span put Leesburg and Lake County in the country's spotlight as the first to hold a national bass fishing tournament. From that point on, as the Chamber of Commerce would say, Leesburg and Lake County became known as "the premier destination for bass in the U.S.A."

Gone Fishing...

Bill Dickens and Chuck Heddon notified FATC of the passing of long time FATC member, Jimmy Strickland. Excerpts from his obituary follows as it appeared in the Orlando Sentinel. FATC extends its deepest sympathies to the Strickland family for their loss.

STRICKLAND, JAMES A. "JIMMY", 67, of Apopka, FL passed away Tuesday, August 5, 2008. He was born June 20, 1941 to Lee A. Strickland and Odessa Lazarus. He was the Owner of Jim's Barber Shop and an active member of the Florida Antique Tackle Collectors. He is survived by his wife Eloise Strickland of Apopka, mother Odessa Noe of Apopka, daughter Elizabeth Morse (George), son Jimmy Strickland (Rose) of Apopka. He has two grandchildren, William Ghekas, Jr. and Andrew Ghekas of Apopka.

Florida Antique Tackle Collectors, Inc.

A NON-PROFIT EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION
DEDICATED TO THE PRESERVATION OF OUR ANGLING HERITAGE

Florida Antique Tackle Collectors, Inc. (FATC) is a non-profit, educational corporation, incorporated in the State of Florida. The purpose of FATC is educational through the collection and distribution of historical and technical data regarding fishing equipment, its development, its inventors and manufacturers from the earliest times through the present day, and to assist other groups and individuals having a similar purpose. In order to enhance the knowledge of these subjects, the collection and preservation of examples of fishing tackle is to be encouraged for the benefit of present and future generations.

FATC was founded in 1987. The founders felt that a statewide organization would provide additional opportunities for residents of Florida and others to learn more about the history of angling in Florida and elsewhere. FATC sponsors four exhibitions, open to the public, annually at different Florida

locations. At the exhibitions members display their collections, interact with the public, and engage in other activities in keeping with the purpose of FATC. FATC publishes a newsletter quarterly, and an annual membership directory. FATC is not affiliated in any way with the National Fishing Lure Collector's Club (NFLCC) or the Old Reel Collectors Association, Inc., (ORCA) but encourages FATC members to support those organizations.

FATC annual membership dues are: \$35 domestic, \$40 Canada, \$45 Foreign or \$700 (Domestic) Life Membership, \$800 (Canada) Life Membership, and \$900 (Foreign) Life Membership (20x annual dues). Please direct membership inquiries or applications (with your dues) to the FATC Secretary listed below. For membership applications visit our website at: www.fatc.net

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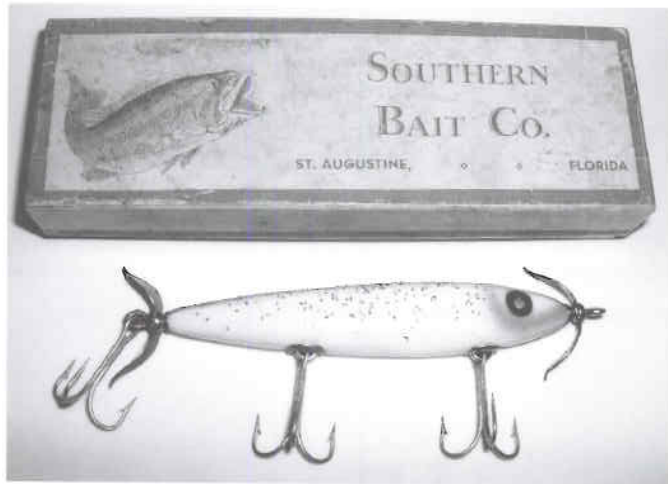
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FATC Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

The most recent FATC Board of Directors (BOD) meeting was held in St. Augustine, FL, on August 23, 2008. Those present were: Dennis McNulty, John Mack, Mike Mais, Larry Lucas, Norm Pinardi, Ed Pritchard, Sally Jett, Lloyd Jett, Ed Weston, Mike Sims, Don Morrow and Ed Bauries. The topics discussed are listed below:

- Motion made to approve the Secretary's report from 5/2/08. Motion approved by the board.
- Motion made to approve Treasurer's report, which was reviewed and approved by the board.
- Old business discussion:
 - "On the Spot" auctions discussion: "On the Spot" auctions are to be held where there is no additional space to hold a traditional auction. Possibility of "On the Spot" auction held at the upcoming Crystal River show.
- Crystal River show discussion:
 - Is there a need for security at the smaller shows? A vote of "No" was passed on additional daytime and night time security.
 - Should the public be allowed into the show for free? It was suggested that it would be a good idea to allow free admission into the show with tackle appraisal. Adults would have a \$2 admission fee. Children's admission (must accompanied by an adult) at no charge.
- Daytona dates discussed: Feb. 20, 21, 22 of 2009. 1/3 of the tables for the Daytona show are sold out at the time of this meeting: explored the possibility of placing an ad in the NFLCC newsletter.
- Discussion on the Spring show with the possibility of having a joint show in conjunction with the CATC. There is talk of the possibly being held in Savannah in May of 2009.
- No further business, meeting adjourned.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

New Members

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POETRY IN MOTION: JOE STAG

BY BERNIE SCHULTZ



Just prior to the 2000 Arkansas NFLCC National, fellow lure collector and ESPN producer Jerry McKinnis approached me about a new TV series called *The Lure Collector*.

The concept called for thirteen short segments on collecting antique lures, all of which were to be filmed during the upcoming show in Little Rock. These short features were slated to air Saturday mornings between ESPN's regularly scheduled programming.

Although the prospects of hosting the series sounded good initially, reality quickly set in. "Why me?" I asked, "I'm not qualified. There are so many more knowledgeable collectors better suited for the job." Jerry assured me that expertise was not a requirement, and that he was more interested in someone identifiable to ESPN's Saturday morning fishing audience. And since their viewers followed tournament fishing closely, he felt I was the likely candidate to bridge the two subjects. I asked Jerry to let me think it over, and that I'd get back to him.

That night, as I pondered the prospects of hosting the series, another concern came to mind. How would I room trade or work the showroom if I were tied up with McKinnis' film crew? After all, my whole motivation for attending the National was to improve my lure collection, and that show was the mother of all vintage tackle shows!

The next morning the phone rang. It was McKinnis wanting an answer. He listened as I expressed my concerns. But being the persuasive guy that he is, he finally got the answer he was looking for.

On the opening day of the meet, McKinnis' film crew was given early access to the showroom, to set up cameras and sound equipment. During that process I was miked and given a rundown of the production objectives. Soon, the room began to fill with exhibitors and the setup process was well underway. My mind wandered, thinking of all the hidden treasure that lay scattered about the room, right there in front of me. So close, and yet so far – I was tied to a sound cable like a pit bull on a short chain!

About an hour later general admission was granted and mass rummaging commenced. Watching as hordes of collectors filtered through the many aisles of tackle, I scanned

the room with contempt – jealous that, in spite of being there first, so many were ahead of me in the search. As the room swelled, I noticed a group of collectors from my home state huddled together at a single table. Sitting in front of them, with his back to me, was a slight man wearing a blue "Gilligan" style hat adorned with flies. With his body partially blocking my view, I could barely make out a single 18" x 24" display case sitting on the table directly in front of him.

The group huddled before him consisted of the heaviest hitters from Florida, all bunched together so tightly it was as if they were attached to each other. The image told me instantly that I had missed something big, really big.

I stood several rows away, boiling with jealousy – knowing I was one of the first to enter the hall that morning, well ahead of that wolf pack. But because of my stint with the film crew, I was unable to ward off the would-be mobbing. My curiosity became obsessive, as I struggled to keep my mind on the production.

Finally, after completing several segments, the director called for a short break. Immediately, I burned a trail directly to the table where some of the mob remained. As I approached, it became obvious another observer was not welcome. Each time I jockeyed for position, the group blocked my access. The mob read like a who's who of Florida collectors, and centered among them was the boss, Ron Gast. And in Ron's hands laid the Holy Grail of Eger lures – the Eger Natural Grass Frog. The lure was painted in a pattern I had never seen before – white with black diagonal bars and red skull cap. With dazzling white glass eyes, the lure looked as though it had never felt the splash of water.



Bernie's "Objet du Désir", this stunning Eger Natural Grass Frog!

After several feeble attempts to get a closer look, the production director called me back for more filming. There it was, the dream lure of every passionate Florida collector, and all I could do was sigh as I backed away from the table.

The hours seemed to drag on, but eventually the film crew broke for lunch. Again, my tracks led straight to the table that just a few hours before looked like the front doors to Best Buy on Black Friday. Across the table sat veteran flyrod-lure collector Jerry Martin, with his single 18" x 24" display case. And to my amazement, inside remained the Eger Natural Grass Frog in all its glory. I clumsily introduced myself and asked him what he wanted for the frog. His reply was soft but sure, "a Heddon Baby Bass Bug intro box."

I thought to myself, a Heddon Baby Bass Bug intro box...that can't be all that hard. I didn't know what it was exactly, and I sure didn't have one. But I thought for a second and then a light bulb came on.

Joe Stag! That's it. I'll go find Joe Stag. If anybody knew where to find one, he would. Heck, he might even have one, I reasoned. Stag has everything! This should be easy.

Across the room was Joe Stagnitti, rearranging his cases after a flurry of mid-morning sales. I approached him cautiously

and asked, "Joe, would you happen to have a Heddon Baby Bass Bug intro box for sale?" Joe stopped what he was doing, looked up at me with a sarcastic grin and said, "Heddon Baby Bass Bug intro box?!...There's like only two known." As I sighed, he quickly added, "But I just happen to know of one at this show, and I'll bet I can get my hands on it."

Like a kid waiting for his parents to awaken on Christmas morning, I anxiously watched as Joe closed his cases one by one. He said, "This is going to be tricky, and it's going to take a while, but let me see what I can do." So with great expectations, I retreated and let him plan his strategy.

The hours passed by as I watched Joe work his magic. He went strategically from table to table, and sometimes back again. And each time he passed it appeared as though he had a different lure or box in his grasp. I studied his moves as he negotiated with each collector along his route. On two occasions I witnessed something very curious. Stag actually accessed the cases of other collectors, plucking key pieces to be bartered on his next stop. This was new to me. I couldn't imagine going into another collector's case, even if invited. Stag did so with deft and confidence, like a bank manager acting with complete authority, accessing the drawers of each teller as he made his rounds.

Soon came closing time, but there was no indication that Joe had been successful in completing the mission. My hopes began to wane. I thought if it didn't happen by now, it probably wouldn't happen at all. So with the rest of the attendees, I left the main hall and retreated to my room upstairs.

That night the phone rang a few times, and each time I thought it might be Joe with good news. Unfortunately, it wasn't Joe, or good news – mostly errant callers trying to find other collectors lost in room trading.

Later, I went to the bar, trying to forget the day's events over a couple of beers. It seemed to work for the time being, but once back in the room, depressing thoughts reentered my head. I struggled to sleep. By morning, I was a complete zombie. I gathered my senses, showered, shaved, then headed down for breakfast.

There, oddly, was Joe Stag, greeting people as he made his way back and forth to the buffet. Every heavy collector from coast to coast knew him,



A beautiful spread of Eger Frogs from Bernie's collection, complete with a rare, early box and tag, and highlighted by Joe Stag's masterpiece of trading.

and each greeted "The Stag" with respect. I watched from a distance, wondering if the success of our mission might still be possible. Hopefully Stag's agenda was set on nothing more, nothing less, than securing the painted Eger Frog.

Once the showroom reopened, I scurried with hordes of other collectors into the empty aisles, hoping to find an overlooked gem among the remaining piles of rummaged tackle. As I moved from table to table, much of the dialogue centered on the previous day's filming efforts, and why ESPN chose an "inexperienced collector" like me to host such an important TV series on our sacred hobby. As I tried explaining McKinnis' plan, reactions were divided. Some seemed to understand, while others only walked away with disdain. At first it bothered me, but then I just accepted it and returned to the business of finding something for my collection.

Soon the day passed, and some of the exhibitors began breaking down their displays ahead of that evening's auction preview. I thought to myself, the curtain was rapidly falling – but the play shouldn't end, not yet. Surely, there was one more scene still to be acted out...

Again, depressing thoughts entered my mind. Here I was at the largest vintage tackle show in the world, and I haven't scored a single meaningful lure for my collection. I began to blame ESPN for distracting me at the most critical part of the show – Day 1, when the doors first open and mounds of collectible tackle lay waiting for claim. That was the time to score – not when everyone is packing for the long ride home. I couldn't stand it. "E-S-P-N", I muttered in frustration.

As I began to load my cases onto the dolly, I noticed Joe Stag walking in front of my table to the far wall. There in the shadow of the balcony, he called out my name, "Bernie Schultz – this is your wake-up call!"

Could it be? Could it be that he was able to make the impossible come true after all? I scurried to his location, and with anxious anticipation, I asked if he got the lure for me. Abruptly, he said "Yes". "But not the Eger Frog."

I considered his words then asked, "If not the frog, what then?"

He said he had a mint CCBCO Gar Minnow, and it was mine for the asking. In my obsession over the Eger Frog I had completely forgotten a previous request I made of Joe, one for a clean Gar Minnow in natural finish. True to his

word, he delivered the Gar. Unfortunately, because of my lust for the Eger, his timing wasn't nearly as appreciated. My response was upbeat nonetheless. A Gar hadn't been my focus for the past 24 hours, but it was a welcome addition to my miscellaneous collection. And a fine Gar it was. So back to my table we went, so that I could give Joe the necessary funds to take possession of the minty Creek Chub.

While digging through my bag for a checkbook, I asked Joe whatever happened with the Heddon intro box, and was he able to secure it to trade for the Eger. His reply shocked me.... "I own it!" he said.

"The Eger Frog," I asked?

"Yep, I own it. Now sit down and let's see if we can work this out."

The rest of the dialogue is a blur, but what remains crisp in my mind is that before he left my table, I owned the painted Eger Frog.

On the plane ride home, I reflected on the events that had transpired. Images raced through my head: all those Florida collectors clustered around

Jerry Martin's table; the single 18"x 24" case which held the Holy Grail of Eger lures; Joe Stag moving with stealth and precision through the showroom, working table after table to complete his mission; filming sequences with ESPN and the many outstanding collections we documented. But what stuck in my mind most was the image of Joe Stag handing me the best Florida lure I could ever imagine acquiring – an Eger Natural Grass Frog, painted in a one-of-a-kind color.

Looking back, it's now obvious that the story I've shared is as important to me as the lure itself, perhaps more so. Each time I hold the frog, I admire its rarity and odd beauty. But as I study it further, the memory of how it was acquired quickly displaces any thoughts of its aesthetic appeal. For often it is not the object itself, but the people and the dynamics of a complex trade that makes the prize so rewarding.

Not only did I get the lure I was after, but four other collectors received exactly what they wanted through Joe's efforts – including Jerry Martin who acquired his Heddon Baby Bass Bug intro box!

Joe Stagnitti successfully orchestrated a five-way trade, and if I hadn't observed it with my own eyes, I would have never believed it – it was like poetry in motion.

Thanks Joe, for taking my collection to the next level so many years ago. But more importantly, thanks for the memory that went along with that find. I guess that is why they call you, "The Stag".

*“Bernie Schultz
– this is your
wake-up call!”*



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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

FATC Fall Show

October 31 - November 2, 2008
Plantation Inn & Resort, Crystal River, FL
Show Host: Mike Mais, mmais68569@embarqmail.com
352-622-2868

FATC International

February 20 - 22, 2009
Plaza Resort & Spa, Daytona Beach, FL
Show Host: Larry Lucas, larry@flowerscentral.com
386-254-5179 or 386-295-7281

FATC/CATC Spring Show

May 22nd and 23rd, 2009
Savannah, GA
Co-Hosts: Ralph Acker and Arthur and Karen Edwards

NFLCC Regional Meet Calendar

October 25, 2008, Fort Wayne, IN... 260-824-4680 (one-day show)
Oct. 31 - Nov. 1, 2008, Kelso, WA... 360-274-8045 or 206-526-5814
November 7 - 8, 2008, Osage Beach, MO... 573-480-3939 or 573-793-3303
January 9 - 10, 2009, Pigeon Forge, TN... 615-449-5431
January 10, 2009, Carthage, MO... 417-358-5942 or 417-623-7112
January 16 - 18, 2009, Milwaukee, WI... 262-632-4735
March 6 - 7, 2009, Indianapolis, IN... 765-653-3670
March, 2009, Palmyra, NY... 315-597-4793
April 3 - 4, 2009, Kelso, WA... 360-274-8045 or 206-526-5814
April 2009, Wadsworth, OH... 330-699-3263 or 330-415-2627
April 18th, 2009, Effingham, IL... 217-644-2294 or 217-868-2427
April 2009, Temple, TX... 254-778-8459, 254-774-1967 or 254-721-2998
May 2009, Kansas City, MO... 816-350-0255
July 2009, The National, Louisville, KY... 309-853-8439