

Fish Tales

Collected and adapted for telling by Chuck Larkin

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Mr. Bass

When I was about five years old, I was fishing with a cane pole on a foot bridge over the Nassawanga creek. My line had just entered the water when the float sank and a huge fish started to pull me right into the creek. I leaned back and started to pull him out. He leaned back and started to pull me in. I knew I was in trouble so I started hollering, Sally, Sally, Sally, hurry, help me.

Sally was our old gray mule, and she was fishing further down the bank. You do not see mules fishing today, and to tell you the truth other than Sally I do not recall ever seeing any other mules fishing. Sometimes she went fishing with Rocky, our Rhode Island Red rooster. When she went fishing by herself she would go down stream where she would not bother anybody and stand on the bank. When a fish came swimming by she would bellywop in on top and knock him out. Then she would just pick up the floating fish with her teeth and set them up on the bank. Sally always had the largest mess of fish after a trip.

Well, that day Sally heard me hollering. She came running up the bank and out onto the foot bridge just before that fish pulled me in. Sally grabbed the butt end of that fishing pole and together we pulled out of the water a humongous bass fish the biggest fish we'd ever seen. When you stood that bass up on his back fins, the top of my head only came to his shoulder (that is, if a fish had shoulders that is about where my head would reach).

My dad was near speechless when he seen my bass. I do not recall the weight and measurements, but if you look up in the Guineas Book of Records you will find that type of information along with my name and Sally's, since that bass still holds the world's record for being the largest bass fish ever caught, and that was back in 1936.

My dad wrapped that gigantic bass up in newspaper and laid him up in the back of our horse-cart. We fished for a couple of more hours, but best I can recollect we only caught a couple catfish and some perch. By the time we got back home to our farm, that bass fish was all dried out, stiff as a board and stuck to that newspaper. My dad dragged him over to the watering trough. This watering trough was longer than a bathtub, and we kept it full of drinking water for our live stock (cows, horses and so forth). Daddy heaved the bass fish into the water to soak the newspaper off his hide when, you won't believe this, that fish began to swim! He was not dead after all. My dad looked at him swimming and said, let's not eat that old fish. Let's just keep him out of the water and see how long it takes him to do die. Today, you'd probably call my dad a pseudo scientist.

It was an interesting experiment. We'd leave the bass out on the ground. He would start flip flopping around and panting, you know how a fish goes when they are out of

water. After an hour or so he would stop breathing, get really still, not even a twitch. We'd walk over and nudge him with our foot. The fish would not move so we'd drag him over to the watering trough, put him back in the water and he'd start swimming again.

The fifth night, I forgot to put him back into the water. After all, I was only five years old and in those days I sometimes forgot things (I still do but now it's because I'm old). The next morning I went out and saw him on the ground, somewhat bowed a little bit, stiff as a board and dead as a door nail. He even started to smell bad. I do not understand how people eat dead fish! Do you eat dead fish?

I dragged him over to the water, put him in and sure enough, he began to swim. I was so relieved! Later I figured out what kept him alive. There was just enough dew on the grass to help him make it through the night.

You may not believe this part. In three days time we had taught the bass to breathe in the air. He did not have to go back in the water. My dad helped me to rig a block and tackle under a large branch of our Oak tree. I connected the line to Mr. Bass up about shoulder high just under his top fins. I'd started calling him Mr. Bass because he was so much taller than me and deserved my respect. With the line, block and tackle I could hoist Mr. Bass up on his bottom fins.

At first, he could not stand without the rope holding him. For the first couple of days, he leaned this-a-way and leaned that-a-way, but he finally got his balance. On the third day I turned him loose. He leaned over and started flopping his bottom fins until he hit a tree. He bounced off, leaned in another direction crossing the barn yard until he hit another tree. I watched him tacking back and forth through the yard like a sail boat. It was not quite walking, but it was not quite standing either. He probably would have had an easier time with walking if his fins could bend like legs with knees. I remember thinking at the time that he looked like he was walking on stilts.

After a few days he got better even to the point where he could flip himself up on his bottom fins. By the end of the week, I had him leash trained. When I came home from school, we would just walk every where. Of course, I knew he did not like the leash, but I told him it was necessary in order for us to go into town together.

Mr. Bass was one of the best pets I ever had. The first time we ever brought him into the house, we found he was already house broken. Mr. Bass and Old Blew, our hound dog, became the best of buddies. They would play hide and go seek, run and fetch and all kinds of games together. Ms. Calico was our cat and she liked to eat fish.

But Mr. Bass was seven times taller than she was. Well, she learned to love that Bass like some of you young ladies love your brothers.

Mr. Bass and I went everywhere together. We'd go to rodeos and wrestling matches and everything together. At home when we would play, Mr. Bass always wanted to wrestle because he could pin me to the mat every time. When it came to rodeoing, I was the best because I always bucked him off my back in under 10 seconds.

I remember once when we were all in the house playing hide and seek. Mr. Bass slid under the couch and got stuck. We could not find him, and he did not call for help. He did not know how to talk. After about three days, he got thin enough to slide out from under that couch. That is when we started to teach that fish how to talk.

I ran into problems right away. As bass fish do not have any vocal cords, he could not make any voice sounds. I did teach him to swallow air and belch with a few noises that sounded like words. At least he could call your attention. Now he was smart, and he quickly learned how to nod his body yes or no when you spoke to him.

We did finally figure out a way to communicate. Today, when deaf people need to communicate they interpret with their hands. They use both hands for words and one hand to make letters to spell words. When I was a boy, the U.S. Navy did not have the fancy radios they have today. The ships used to talk to each other by waiving flags that spelled words. This type of communication is called semaphore. Mr. Bass and I taught ourselves semaphore, but instead of using flags we used our hands. Well, I used my hands and Mr. Bass used the fins on his upper body. It was slow at first, but we got faster and faster with practice.

I remember that first winter, Mr. Bass made himself a bed right behind our old wood stove. He did not like cold weather.

The following spring, the warm weather had broken up the ice on the creek and the ice floes had washed down stream. My dad called out, let's go fishing and catch some supper.

Hush dad, I said. Do not let Mr. Bass hear us talking about going after his kinfolk!

Son, bass fish like to eat fish too. Just then, Mr. Bass had come in and over heard us talking about going fishing, and he got excited about going with us. He was nodding yes, yes and signing away with his fins that he wanted to go fishing too!

During the winter my dad had taken some old leather harness straps, and made a chest rig so Mr. Bass could hold his own fishing pole. I was surprised. My dad and I hitched Sally, our mule, up to the horse cart and loaded my sister, mom, Ms. Calico, Old Blew, and Mr. Bass. Then we headed off to the Nassawanga creek.

Now you need to understand. At the time, I was about six years old. I did not believe in all them liberal ideas like justice and fair play, I was flat out selfish. I knew that at the end of the old foot bridge was a deep hole where a bunch of fish always hung out. I knew that whoever got their fishing pole into that hole first always caught the finest mess of fish. So, before Sally stopped that cart, I jumped off the back end with my fishing pole and started running for the bridge and that good fishing spot. Well, you remember that Mr. Bass used to live in those parts. When he saw me jump out he knew I was cheating, because he knew about the deep hole at the end of the fishing pier. He grabbed his fishing pole and jumped right out behind me and tried to race me to that spot. But with my knees able to bend my legs up against his stiff fins, I beat him good. I got my fishing line into the water first, and went, na na na na naaa. I turned around just in time to see Mr. Bass trip on a loose board and flip off the dock into the water. Before we could get to him he had drowned. Mr. Bass had forgotten how to breathe in the water, and he never did know how to swim on the surface. I wish we had known about CPR in the old days, we might have been able to dive in and save his life. We did pull Mr. Bass out of the water, carried him home and ate him for supper. As I recall he tasted just like chicken. Fish that taste like chicken must result from eating grits. Grits was Mr. Bass's favorite food that winter.

AND THAT'S A SAD, SAD, SAD BUT TRUE STORY

Mississippi River Fishing

I was about 16 years old the summer I arrived in Carlisle county, Kentucky to vacation with my Uncle Ike, Aunt Bert and Cousin Guy. The day I arrived my Uncle said, Chuck, I heard you have learned to swim, so you can use my flat bottomed wooden row boat tied up there on the river bank." Well, the first thing I did was head to the barn to make some special fishing gear. My friends at home had been telling me about how big Mississippi fish were and they tasted like chicken. I wanted to catch one or two.

My Uncle had some blacksmith equipment. I fired up the forge and made a fishing hook from two old iron horse shoes. It was a big hook like if I curled my wrist and hand up toward my arm. In the barn I also found an old busted up piano. I pulled out a big thick piece of piano wire. I would estimate today that the wire would be about a 2,000-pound test line. After all I was after a big fish and in the old days you went fishing to catch fish. We had never heard about sport fishing. For a fishing pole I borrowed my Uncle's small flag pole. In the forties, we did not have aluminum flag poles like the whimpy ones today. In the old days, our flag poles were made of U.S. steel. Next, I fixed some dough ball bait. For those of you who were raised culturally-deprived, dough ball bait is made out of course ground yellow corn with bacon fat mixed in to hold it together. The dough ball bait I made was about the size of a soccer ball. I put it around my hook and baked it in the oven awhile until the dough hardened up some.

The next morning, I dropped my baited hook into the water from the front of the boat. Wham bam a fish grabbed that bait and the next thing I knew I was being towed down the Mississippi at incredible speed. That surprised me, because I knew I had tethered the boat to a small 100 foot Oak tree. I looked back and that tree was bobbing in the water behind me. The roots of the Oak tree were still snagged in a tiny five acre island it had torn loose. The island was fluttering along behind the Oak tree. It looked like a giant cow flop. We went skimming over the water at such amazing speed that the friction of the water passing under that wooden hull was too much. The boat's bottom started to heat up. The next thing I knew, the bottom of the boat was on fire! The boat sank and left me barefoot water skiing down the Mississippi river holding on to that steel fishing pole.

Now, I know that some of you do not believe me. Well, I'm known to be open, forthright, candid and truthful. If you check the Guinness book of records, you will find my name listed as the father of barefoot water skiing. I was clocked that day at 96 miles per hour. That was 1947. I held the speed record until 1951 when Evenrude finely built a motor large enough to take the record away from me.

Suddenly the line went slack and I sank. I swam up to the surface. Let me tell you something. If you find yourself in the water in the middle of the Mississippi, that river looks about as wide as it is long. And the Mississippi river runs from D-11 to L-14. I started to shout for help. But I had swallowed too much Mississippi river water. I was all choked up. All I could do was whisper the word help. I reached into my bib overalls and pulled out my reading glasses.

When I was a child my eyes were so bad I had to wear big thick lens glasses to read. I have gotten older my eyes have gotten better, so now I just pick up some thin magnifying glasses in a drug store for reading. I put the big thick lens up to my mouth and whispered, "help, help, help." Those glasses magnified my voice so, people as far away as Vicksburg thought it was Gabriel's horn and Judgment day was here. Boats came from everywhere.

I was picked up by a stern wheeler river boat. Let me digress from telling about my experience that day. Back in 1985, in Louisville, Kentucky, I was telling stories on the Belle of Louisville during the Corn Island Storytelling Festival. The boat appeared familiar. I looked on the bulkhead by the Captain's cabin and found the wall plaque that had been put up in 1947 to commemorate what happened that day. My name is on it, you can check it out and see for yourself! I'd eat fried chicken before I'd tell a lie. I was on the boat that pulled me from the water that day.

I was wet, irritated and still holding the fishing pole. I gave the pole a great heave to set the hook. That is when I discovered that the fish that had taken my bait had never moved. It was my bait moving from his mouth to his stomach that had drugged me so fast in the reverse direction down the Mississippi river. That was one humongous fish. Do you know that Jack Cousteau put 185 underwater photographers into the Mississippi river? They took one sequential lengthy picture of that leviathan fish, and the picture itself weighed three tons! That is one big fish.

When I popped that fishing pole, up out of the water came nine Guernsey cows, five hogs, a flock of 27 Mallard ducks and four acres of corn. Apparently they had been feeding on the corn inside that fish. Next came a baby 432 pound catfish with my fishing hook caught in his tail. It was a lucky catch after all. Now here is the part some people do not believe. In the side of the baby 432-pound catfish was a fishing spear with a 54 foot long line. On the other end of the line we found a skeleton of a man. He was sitting in a small row boat with the end of the line tethered around his wrist. Between the feet of the skeleton was a small leather bag filled with 720, mint new, gold coins, date stamped 1872.

I thought this was my lucky day. That is, until we returned to Carlisle County where old Judge Vandegriff recognized his Guernsey cows and hogs. He thanked me profusely, without financial reward I might add, for rescuing his cows and hogs. They had been swallowed a year earlier during the drought when they were all skin and bones and as thin as fence rails, but after feeding on the corn they had fattened up well. Of course the corn was gone and only the fodder was left. Would you believe? The FBI impounded the gold pieces. They had been stolen in a bank robbery in Memphis, Tennessee in 1881. The robber had been ingested by that fish during his getaway. That is when I learned that sometimes crime does not pay. And I've been ruined for fishing every since. I do not know about you but I do

not ever want to hook on to another fish the size of the one that got away that day. Anything smaller than a 432-pound catfish is just too small for me to bother with.

Now I know some of you doubt the validity of this experience, but I have proof. I still have my baby jack knife, Santa Clause gave me when I was just three years old. You see, I was born during the great depression. When a child got to the walking talking stage, they got their own pocket knife. We used that pocket knife to cut that skeleton free and give him a fitting burial. The next time you see me, ask me and I will show my baby pocket knife to you. I do not lie.

AND THAT'S A TRUE STORY

Ringtail

I might tell you something seven or eight ways but I won't tell you any lies. Ringtail was a pedigreed, Golden Retriever, bird dog. Her nickname was from a black ring on her tail. She lived with my cousin Willie Poole, a man whose porch light was on but nobody was at home. I probably should not say that but he just was not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Once I mentioned he had on socks of different colors he said he knew that but he preferred to match his socks by thickness. His Momma had left him well off financially and he never did work. Whenever he was asked or needed to list his occupation he would always testify that he made a decent living as a proofreader for a skywriting company. Folks would get really quiet and think about that for a while and then just nod. Well, I wanted to tell you about Ringtail she was some dog. I recall once when we had planned to go hunting down on the Pocomoke river. Willie could not get his pick up truck started. They fell to arguing like folks do who have lived together too long. I felt a little embarrassed but Ringtail was right, fixed the timing and that country Cadillac fired right up. Willie a bit spiteful, said at least he knew how to swim. Ringtail, being pedigreed and all that, she just lifted her nose, rolled her eyes at me and whispered, "a hit dog yelps." Later that day we shot a mallard duck and I watched that golden retriever dog with the black ring on her tail go on her tiptoes out over the water to pick up that duck. I understood then what Willie had meant. Ringtail couldn't or wouldn't swim.

What a fine hunting and fishing dog She was. If you picked up your fishing pole she went outside and started digging up earth worms for bait. Pick up your gun and she would put in her ear plugs and fetch the game bag. She did not care for golf though. She knew if Willie hit into a water trap she would have to duck her head below the surface and retrieve his ball. Ringtail did not like to get her face wet.

When it came to hunting you couldn't find a better partner. I remember once I shot three ducks with one bullet, I know that sounds impossible but not with Ringtail. She just ran around on top of the water and lined the ducks up in a straight line, one behind the other.

I loved having Ringtail along when we went float fishing. She would run out over the water carrying a small glass bottomed, wooden bucket. She had thought it up and Willie had made the bucket for her. Every now and then Ringtail would put the bucket down and peer below the surface until she found some big fish. If they were in casting range she would first flip a bobber over to mark the spot then she would back up and signal where to cast and how deep the fish were so we could set the line. After she would back up a ways she'd put the bucket down and watch the fish. Oh some times she would drop a line in with us but to tell

you the truth she seemed to enjoy watching us catch the fish. If the fish swam out of range well she would just herd them back in our direction by splashing her tail. Just the tip though, I mean that dog did not like to get wet.

There was one time Willie told me that they were fishing over in the Tennessee river up above Chattanooga near Soddy Daisy, Tennessee when Ringtail came running off the river in a terror. Ringtail spoke up and said Willie would have been scared too if he had seen the Blue Catfish she had seen. Both of them started in telling about that adventure. As I recall the story, there had been rumors for years of a big catfish that swam back and forth between Chattanooga and Soddy Daisy.

The Tennessee River has two big bends and the river widens considerably at those two communities. The catfish was so large that he liked lots of room to make his turns. He'd swim south to Chattanooga turn and swim north to Soddy Daisy and turn around again. If he turned anywhere else he would scrape his sides. Old timers said that sometimes he'd swim over to Alabama and stay for a spell if folks got to bothering him too much. Most of the time he could only be seen at dusk or dawn. Folks had taken to calling that catfish Grand-daddy Roberts after a popular local politician and country singer named Dalton Roberts.

Well those two decided to catch that fish. I never did figure who came up with what part of the plan. If one thought of an idea for part of the plan the other would recollect mentioning something years earlier that had fomented in the other's head like a compost heap and directly contributed to the other's later creation of the idea. This type of dialogue went on all the time. I believe those two could have spent years talking about who said what to whom. However, Willie's five year old niece Rachel apparently was visiting with Violet his Moma and after listening to Willie and Ringtail argue, Rachel laid out the plan. What I pieced together was they got a logging chain, rented a barge with a crane hoist and hired a blacksmith shop to build a humongous three pronged snatch hook out of a ship's anchor.

Up near but below Soddy Daisy in a deep spot, Ringtail had located, they laid down the logging chain with the snatch hook on the end where Grand-daddy Roberts would swim over. The other end of the chain they attached to the barge's crane. The barge they secured with several anchors and steel cables over to both river banks where they were attached to some big oak trees.

The plan was for Ringtail to scout, that morning before dawn, using an infrared light attached under the glass bottomed bucket. That way she could see that catfish and track Grand-daddy Roberts. When Ringtail gave the signal Willie was to yank up the snatch hook. It was a big plan

that almost worked. They hooked Grand- daddy Roberts just after he had made his turn up at Soddy Daisy and was heading south. Ringtail said he was hooked back near the tail. The timing was just a tad off in pulling up that three pronged snatch hook but one of the prongs got him. Grand- daddy Roberts got to the end of the chain and for about ten minutes the crane on the barge was pulling him in and I mean he was giving them a fight. Suddenly he swished his tail and the prong on the hook busted clean through. The catfish did not turn around at Chattanooga but kept heading south and was last seen down in Alabama. The hook's tempered steel prong was six inches thick where it broke. This all happened a long time ago before sport fishing had gotten started. Today any fisher woman worth her salt would have told them they should never have tied down the barge. With a big fish, you need to play them some in order to catch them. With the barge on as a drag the prong would never had busted.

It's hard to believe but I have seen it that fishing hook with the busted prong. Outside and north of Oak Ridge and Knoxville, Tennessee along I-75 there is a place called the Appalachian Museum that is filled with antique log cabins and buildings which are filled with antiques. In the second barn where they have the old time fishing gear and next to the fishing gigs you can see that huge snatch hook with the one busted prong. Above the snatch hook hanging on the wall is a framed photograph of a huge catfish and you can see a tear near his tail fluke with the steel barb from the snatch hook still imbedded. I have been there, I have seen it.

I remember the time like it was yesterday when they shared that story. In the evenings when we would sit around and tell stories Ringtail would always retell her favorite story about her brother. The one who became a seeing eye dog and how his master, who was blind, would go into a store, pick him up and turn him around and around in the air until a sales clerk would ask if they could be of service. Then his master would laugh and say, "no, I'm just looking around." To tell you the truth sometimes that story after several tellings would get kind of monotonous but she was some dog.

I'll never forget our last sad hunting trip together. Willie and I were after a bear and Ringtail had crossed a small creek. She flushed up a pheasant, just for practice you know. She was chasing that bird when all of a sudden she tried to stop. We could see her claws kicking up dust as she tried to dig into reverse. If there was one thing that poor dog was scared of it was snakes and Ringtail had seen a poisonous, copperhead snake. Ringtail died that day. No, not from snake bite though. She stopped so fast that ring of black fur on her tail slid up over her body, around her neck and before we could get to her she had choked to death. We'd tried CPR but we were too late. I was a young teenager then

But that was a lesson in life. Sometimes quick stops can be dangerous.

AND THAT'S A TRUE STORY

The Hobo Fish

I was fishing on the Suwannee river one strange day. And it was a strange day. Although any fisher person will tell you strange fishing days are not unusual.

I was in my small flat bottomed row boat and I had just started fishing when this story began. I hooked a nice sized fish or so I thought at the time because of the pull and struggle I had pulling the fish up to the boat. What I had were two fish. The first fish was a trout and a second larger fish, an old trash fish that people call a hobo fish was hanging on to the trout fish's tail. I reckon we both had caught the trout at the same time. I had him hooked on the front and the hobo had champed down on the back tail. It was a fair sized fish and neither one of us wanted to let go. I reached into my bait bucket and grabbed a fresh shrimp and tucked it into the side of the mouth of the hobo. He tasted it, thought it over and decided he liked the shrimp better. After all, shrimp were not native to that part of the river. The hobo deeded his claim to the trout, so to speak, over to me. Now what was strange was the rest of the day or at least a good part of the day the hobo would come by now and then with another trout wiggling in his mouth that he would swap up for another shrimp.

Meanwhile, I was just float fishing, not really trying to do any serious fishing. You know just enjoying the river and out doors. I started watching a fishing hawk that had a nest up near the top of one of the Cypress trees. I still think about what I saw that day. The fishing hawk would drop down in a small clearing and scratch around until she had found an insect or a small, squirming worm. Next she would fly up a bit then go out over the water, drop the bait and swing around in a circle until a fish made it's move. That fish hawk would hit the water just as the fish grabbed the bait for his last meal, so to speak. Then she would fly up to her nest and start feeding the young ones.

I was mulling over in my mind how that hawk had come to develop that kind of fishing when I saw another astonishing event. I watched a gray squirrel come down on a low branch and reach down for a good sized acorn floating in the water just under the branch. The little feller just couldn't quite reach the acorn. After he thought on it awhile, he tried again this time he wrapped his tail around the tip end of the branch and held in his two front paws a small stick in order to reach the acorn. He just barely touched it when he slipped off the branch, hit the water, grabbed the acorn and turned swimming for the bank. Wham bam sam a gator got him. I thought, tough luck that gator must have just been dozing right under the branch where he splashed down. I was wrong. In a few moments here came that gator back swimming with that same big fat acorn on his nose. When

he got under the branch he submerged so slowly he left not a ripple just the acorn in perfect position. A squirrel hunting gator was a new one on me. I still wonder who learned first the hawk or the gator.

The shadows had gotten long and I was out of bait when that hobo came back with a sizable fish. I looked around and all I could find to swap with was an old smelly piece of shrimp laying in the bottom of the boat in the sun all day. I took hold of the big fish and flipped hobo the rotting piece of shrimp. By then I had named and was calling that old trash fish "Hobo". After a brief taste he spit it out. He was not happy with that trade. I picked up my oar and started sculling over toward the dock when Hobo returned holding a blow fish in his mouth. He reared up out of the water and squirted me from head to foot with stank water from some pocket along the side of the river. I smelled so bad the buzzards started circling, I had to keep moving up wind. To tell you the truth I have never used a piece of old rotten shrimp for bait since then. I would have apologized to Hobo but he had left in a huff.

That's when I saw another squirrel come off a high tree, hop on a dead tree limb laying down on the bank with the end sticking in the water. He ran out toward the end where I could see another fair sized acorn near the water. I thought not another gator squirrel hunting. Nope, he got it and turned to run back when a little twenty pound or so large mouth bass fish leaped over the log, back into the water with the squirrel. I watched and sure enough a bit later here came the bass putting the acorn back on the log. I think the squirrels on that section of the river are in deep trouble.

I was wet, smelly but inspired from my experiences when I reached the boat landing and I also had a fair sized catch. Cleve, at the landing, looked over my catch and commented on the big one. That was the last fish I had gotten from the hobo fish. Cleve thought that I ought to consider putting that one back in because he might still grow up to be a talking about sized fish like the one he caught a week earlier. I said, "all right I'll bite, how big was that one you caught last week?" Cleve announced to everybody standing around that his fish could easily be stretch from one end of Georgia to the other. I countered with, "I hoped someday to catch one or two that size. At home I have a frying pan I inherited from my Grandpa that would easily hold two fish the size Cleve caught." I continued, "that was all I did inherit from Grandpa cause they lived during the great depression and were too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash, fact is they were so poor Grandpa and Grannie had to share the same wedding ring." Cleve said, "alright you got the better that time."

Cleve and I sat and talked a spell. A great philosopher, Cleve's favorite sayings are; "It's later then it's ever been", "It's better to die childless then to parent an orphan" and my favorite "Always explore the gray area between yes you can and no you can't." His boat landing is next to the bridge that allows the Suwannee river to pass under state road 135. That afternoon we both heard this rumble kind of noise. We looked and here comes from up stream a fish so big its sides were scraping along both banks. When that fish reached the bridge it could see it couldn't squeeze under so it reversed its fin movement and backed up. The

next thing we knew, that fish was coming down stream again full throttle, so to speak, and leaped up out of the water and over the bridge. What caught our attention was the fact that as that middling sized fish was coming down on the other side of the bridge a larger fish jumped up and swallowed him. Later after we thought it over we agreed it must have been the same noise that had caught our attention that had caught the bigger fishes attention. To tell you the truth that was a strange day.

AND THAT'S A TRUE STORY

Jean Shilling's Catfish Farm

A few years ago I was in Maysville, Kentucky for a couple of days. While I was there, I had the opportunity to visit a commercial catfish farm. Maysville is southeast of Cincinnati up river on the Ohio river. This story about the Jean and Lee Shilling's catfish farm probably should not be in a collection of tall tales such as this. Why, because except for a faulty memory I'll try to be accurate as I can about what I truthfully saw.

Some friends in the area drove me further east along the Ohio river until we came to a small side creek. Up the creek less than a mile was the catfish farm. The catfish farmer had developed several ponds around a spring that originally fed into the creek. The water overflow still enters the creek. One advantage to the operation is that the spring fed ponds also stayed about the same temperature year round.

Jean built herself a small pond with some high school young ladies in their 4H club. Jean and the youngsters feed the fish a small food ball she makes from a mixture of ground corn meal, protein and iron. She uses ground up raisins and chicken livers soaked in codfish oil for the iron. The fish are growing faster than usual from the diet and last week the group did their first harvest. The young women and Jean have three cables strung across the pond that serve as electric magnets. When Jean turns on the electric power the electric magnetic cables produce enough magnetism to attract and draw in the iron deposited in the flesh of the fish from the diet of raisins, chicken livers and cod liver oil. The youngsters move their boat along the cable and with thick rubber gloves pull off the catfish Jean wants to keep. When she turns off the electric cables, the rest swim away.

Building the pond was a brilliant concept. In building the pond Jean and the students planted several fast growing bushes in a solid circle. Next they planted two side by

side rows of bushes to and from the creek. Jean waited until one of the massive blackbird migrations came into the area. One afternoon the group went out and sprayed a mixture of mostly pine sap and molasses on all of the bushes. Next they sprayed some kernels of yellow corn on the bushes for bait. Just before dark about a thousand black birds flew in and started to feed. Sun went down so they roosted there for the night. Over night the action of the sap and other ingredients hardened up like glue much thicker than the normal stickiness of molasses. The birds could not fly. Just as the sun came up, right at the crack of dawn the students who had slept over all night sneaked out and around the bushes full of birds. They all started the most incredible racket you could imagine. Scared the birds so bad they all pumped their wings simultaneously, lifted up and the bushes stuck to their feet with about a hundred cubic yards of dirt clinging to the roots of the bushes. The pond was dug including the two feeder ditches to move the water in and out of the pond. I said, "Jean what about the black birds." Jean said, "No problem, we drove the birds over the garden toward the tree line. By the time they reach the tree line that fresh, rich top soil had shaken off the roots and had spread well out over the garden." Jean added that it was a group plan for the birds to rest over by the woods and when the sun was up the molasses softened up and turned them loose. After all they did eat well for their work. They also spread some corn over by the trees for their breakfast.

I said, "Jean it's too bad you never met my Grandma Dorothy. She trained some squirrels to help harvest." The next thing I knew everybody wanted to hear about my Grandma Dorothy. When you are not prepared where do you start? I told them that the story had nothing to do with fishing but they insisted so I promised to tell the story later.

AND THAT'S A TRUE STORY

Lee Shilling's Circus Catfish

Lee's Catfish Farm is probably not too different from the usual operation. He has several ponds with different size catfish and he had a few ponds segregated according to the variety of catfish. The feeding process is all automated and the spring fed ponds hold a steady temperature year round. The processing sheds are weatherized for year round activity and they ship to a large market.

The pond I want to describe, Lee calls his circus pond. Lee has one pond the size of an Olympic swimming pool with seven enormous blue catfish from the Mississippi River. Lee is training these catfish for a circus act. Blue Catfish grow substantially larger and are more intelligent than the normal run of catfish. Lee Shilling even believes they are smarter than dolphins or porpoises. I've never been able to learn just how big they grow. Some experts think they grow as long as there is ample food until they die. Lee has trained his Blue catfish to swim in patterns and do things like leap frog but in the water. They leap out of the water over hurdles even through hoops. That was a good trick as the seven came up out of the water one at a time each would grab the tail of the catfish in front while in the air and hold on until they had passed through the hoop and back

into the water. Lee had them pair up three against three and play water polo with the seventh being the whistle blowing referee. They push large floating balls in relay type races. I do not remember how many tricks, I would guess about a dozen but Lee said they needed to develop another half dozen tricks to fill enough time for a full circus act performance.

Lee did show us his closing showcase act. The Blue catfish respond to hand signals and underwater signals. In the show's finale the blue catfish rise up on their tails with American flags in their mouths and scull backwards across the pool grunting My Old Kentucky Home, like they were trained dolphins. The trick is this, first Lee signals the group to come to the side of the pool and line up in a prearranged pattern. Next he puts a small stick with an American flag in their mouths. He gives them the signal and they rise up together and grunt as they go backwards across the pool. Lee swears if you listen carefully they are lined up to grunt in different notes the song "My Old Kentucky Home." Well to tell you the truth they were grunting but they all sounded the same to me.

AND THAT'S A TRUE STORY

Fishing

That is a pretty area along the Ohio river. It reminded me of a time in my childhood listening to my dad and neighbors talking on the back steps about fishing. They were chicken fishing for supper.

When I was a child we would sit on the back steps with an old cane pole, about ten feet of line. For chicken bait we would drill a hole through a kernel of corn and tie the corn on our line. When we were ready we'd chum with corn. That means we'd throw a handful of corn into the barnyard to bring the chickens in. Cast your piece of corn among the chicken and in no time you have one on the line. Chickens fight better than fish as I recall.

That day Silvester remarked how he caught a fish one day last week in the Nassawanga creek. A fish so big then it was longer than the creek was wide. My Dad never blinked. He said, "yes I've seen fish like that, poor fish can't hardly turn around, just go forward and backward but I never had the privilege of catching one. Last Saturday I did hook onto an old antique railroad lantern and when I pulled it out of the water it was still lit. Silvester said, "still lit Jim? That is hard to think on and a might hard to consider swallow-

ing." Dad said, "well Silvester if you will lob about 10 feet off that fish I'll blow out the light in the lantern." Rutledge spoke up and said, "I prefer to do my fishing with chewing tobacco. I just cut up a plug into small bits and spreads the chunks in the water. Trout fish love chewing tobacco, when they come up to the surface to spit I smack them with a pole and knock them out." My mother piped in then from the kitchen door, "I prefer using small paper bags, size of lunch bags, maybe three or four with each holding a small-ish rock. You put four seltzer into each sack and just drop them in the water. Rocks suck the sacks to the bottom and when the water pours in the seltzer rises out of the sack. Bass see the fizzling seltzer rising in the water, silly fish, they think it's wounded minnows. They swim in, swallow the chunks which keep fizzing and blow up their little tummies like balloons. They roll over and float up to the surface. I use a dip net on a long pole. You got to move fast. As they come to the surface the gas pressure is increasing and the water pressure is decreasing. They tend to belch and swim back down.

AND THAT'S A TRUE STORY

These Fish Stories are collected and adapted for telling by Bluegrass Storyteller, Chuck Larkin. Permission to use, revise and tell the stories from this manuscript is granted to the storytelling public.

Fishing with Little Green Frogs

Traditional Story from the Website of Bluegrass Storyteller, Chuck Larkin

This is a true story. In 1989 I was backpacking up near the headwaters of the Chattahoochee river. When backpacking, I carry a small, fold up fishing pole and reel. After I had finished setting up my tent, I walked down to the river to fish. Sitting on the bank was an old mountain man with a long string of trout fish he had caught. I walked over and in my best non-city accent I said, "Hoo wee that's sure one fine mess of fish."

"Why thank ye young feller. I use little green frogs for bait. Here watch, see how I tie the hook to one leg? I do not stick no hook through the frog, no siree. After tying the hook to one leg I loop the fishing line and tie the line to the other leg. That a way, the frog is hobbled like a prisoner and can't swim fast. That's my way of fishing. Would you like to try? Here's a little green frog."

"Yes sir! Thank you very much."

I almost lost my accent I was that surprised. We introduced ourselves. His name was Lightning Giles. Lightning, he related later after we talked for a bit, was his nickname. He handed me this little green Frog. Well, I went down stream to fish, far enough so I would not disturb his fishing. I tied that frog on my hook just like he had showed me. I cast over toward the far bank. The river is not very wide that far into the mountains.

I had just started slowly reeling that frog in when I noticed a ripple in the water over against some reeds on the left. The ripple was moving toward the frog. I thought wow! This is my lucky day! Here comes a fish. Then I saw that it was not a fish making that ripple in the water but a poisonous cotton mouth water moccasin snake. I quickly started reeling in my little green frog as fast as I could with that snake gaining on him. Just as I pulled my little green frog out of the water that snake reached up and grabbed hold of his hind quarters and he would not let go. There I stood, leaning over, holding that teeny, tiny, little, peewee, pocket-sized, 18 inch fishing pole, stretching out as far as I could, jiggling that pole, trying to shake that poisonous cotton mouth water moccasin snake lose.

I will tell you the truth. I do not care much for snakes. I could maybe like them a little bit, if they had legs, but they don't. Luckily, I had some mosquito repellent with me. The kind you take a swallow of and as you cough you blow obnoxious fumes around to get rid of the mosquitoes. We

call it Black Jack Daniel's Mosquito Repellent. Well I flat out tossed in a mouth full with my free hand. Leaning down, I lined her up and blew a mouthful of that Black Jack Daniel's Mosquito Repellent straight into that snake's mouth. Ha wee, she sure enough spit out my little green frog, spun around on her tail and dove down, out of sight, I guessed she needed a water chaser.

That was an interesting experience. Well anyway, what I wanted to tell you about was this. On the second cast I caught an enormous 5 pound, 4 ounce, wild native mountain trout fish. I missed the World's record by 1.8 ounces. I was excited because at the time I knew I was close to a record catch. I was unhooking that trout fish when I felt a bump, bump, bump on my ankle. I looked down and there was that poisonous, cotton mouth, water moccasin snake at my feet. She was holding two little green frogs in her mouth. She wanted to trade up for some more of that Black Jack Daniel's' Mosquito Repellent. I had never bartered with a snake. I took a good sized mouth full, leaned over and blew two driblets into her mouth. That was just what she wanted. She set the two little green frogs down, already hog-tied with vines so they couldn't get away. The snake reared up on her tail and she licked me right on the lips. Now don't be surprised. If you use enough of that mosquito repellent you too can kiss a snake. Well she and I fished the rest of the day. That venomous, reptilian, cotton mouth, water moccasin snake, what could I do? I started calling her Wiggly Sidney. I do not know why, other then I always did prefer to be on a first name basis with fishing partners. Wiggly Sidney snared and supplied the trussed up bait in exchange for the mosquito repellent. I went back to camp about dusk with a fine mess of cleaned and flayed fresh fish for supper and they tasted just like chicken. Not the big one I caught first. I had him mounted. If you come by my place, you can see him on the wall. Next to a picture I took of Wiggly Sidney swimming in with a couple of little green frogs tied to seven inch leashes. She's swimming and there dangling one on each side of her mouth. I wish I had a picture of Wiggly Sidney trying to swim home that day. That poor old snake was lurching and straining to swim home sideways as drunk as a skunk. If I hadn't of been there to see it with my own two eyes I would never have believed what I saw that day, but I was there. Friends have asked how I knew she was a lady snake. Well that's easy I only kiss ladies.