

Canadian Bass

Drowned in Armagnac, roasted whole and eaten that way, bones and all, while the diner draped his head with a linen napkin to preserve the precious aromas and, some believe, to hide from God - The Wine Spectator

On our first day out, we caught more fish than two big men could carry. Not on our backs, mind you, because that would have taken at least four strapping youths. We carried 45 fish, and they were draped in pairs over a boat oar nestled in the crook of a pair of shoulders. The biggest fish was six pounds, the smallest three, and averaged four - very large for the species we pursued. Unable to comfortably lift the 180 pounds from the ground, we oar-bearers stood as the others carefully strung the fish out, balancing them along the shaft of the oar.

The 300-foot portage was not too far. The problem came when the fish started to swing from side to side. Seeing us staggering along, one of the veterans of these trips knew that marching in unison, step by step, caused the oscillation. He halted us and re-set our pacing with me in the back a half pace off the guy in front. I chose the rear position because I wanted to look at the fish I caught, the biggest of the school.



Whether we caught fish or not, all was good once we arrived in Quetico Provincial Park, “a place of great beauty and a benevolent spirit.” We angled for the cold-water sub-species of *sander vitreous*, the beloved Walleye, delectable enough to be the official provincial fish of Manitoba and the state fish of Minnesota.¹

With an omnipresent chew placed below his lower lip, chin-dimpled Cousin George awaited us at the side of the rock-paved primitive airstrip at Atikokan, Ontario. The village was true to its Ojibwa-Chippewa name since it was little more than a caribou crossing. Not without trepidation, my friend Tom and I, both freshly licensed private pilots, tip-toe landed the ugly Beechcraft Musketeer onto the rough field of uncompacted fist-sized stones and jounce-taxed to our assigned rope tie-downs.



My reprobate great-uncle Louis, George’s father, had abandoned his Swedish wife and his infant son George shortly after she gave birth and disappeared. Around his 1st birthday, George was orphaned when his mother died and was subsequently raised by his stern and unkind immigrant grandmother on a small farm in Minnesota near Rochester. George found solace in fishing the lakes near the farm.

¹ Two Garrisons, one in North Dakota and the other in Minnesota call themselves the “Walleye Capital of the World.” Each has erected a sculpture of the fish. Garrison, North Dakota, is home to ‘Wally the Walleye’ and the state Governor’s Cup tournament. Nowhere else in the world is there a sign that reads, “Stay off the Fish.” The town in Minnesota has the yearly Walleye Festival.

Driven by a mortal fear of flying, I cured the irrationality by taking flying lessons. I was so busy learning that I forgot to be afraid. Once licensed, my \$10,000 fixed gear 140 miles per hour airplane afforded me access to distant destinations. Cousin George had invited me and I had invited Tom to join him and his lifelong Minnesota friends on their yearly fishing jaunt up to Clearwater West Lake and beyond.

Just north of Duluth and west of Thunder Bay, Atikokan had the nearest landing field to Clearwater. George agreed to pick us up in his Ford 250 slide-in camper pickup and drive us one hour northwest to the Brown's Clear Water West 'Resort.' Proprietor Brown met us and cheerily welcomed us with "Compliments of the season to you, eh?" I have since learned Canadian schoolchildren are taught to spell Canada with a hearty "C 'eh' N 'eh' D 'eh.'"



Tom and I soon met George's lifelong buddies from Bemidji and their children and grandchildren. For the fishing party, this was the focal point of the year, more important than Christmas. They had prepared assiduously for this trip. Each

group traveled with three deeply V-shaped Lund boats on a trailer. The first boat was a 16-footer. Inside first came an overturned 12-foot under an also overturned 14-footer. Hauled by pickups with campers, two outboard motors were hung on the 16-foot boat transoms – a 30-horse power Evinrude and a 3-horse kicker. Inside were two more outboards for the 14-foot boat. Nothing fancy, everything utilitarian.

Once refloated on the lake, the vessels were trained up in a triple-boat configuration, with the 16 towing the 14. the 12 behind. After an hour motoring across cold Clearwater West, the 16-foot boats were beached, the others untied and brought to shore. Along with two outboards, the two smaller boats were portaged to White Otter Lake, featuring the further hour distant penultimate destination, White Otter's Walleye Bay, where, of course, were the walleye. But first, the 3rd boat, the 12-footer, was towed



across White Otter and portaged up to the much smaller Emery Lake, where there were Rainbow trout, fished for sport, and a diversion when the walleye were off the bite.

Although lake trout swam deep in Clearwater West, the trout were not a delicacy like the much-preferred cold-water Walleye. The elaborate operation had been perfected and passed on from older generations who had learned how to get at the better fish through

much trial and error. All this had been set up before Tom and I arrived. The others had done all the work. All we had to do was show up.

The night of our arrival, we sat around a campfire and were surprised when an active eighty-year-old university professor showed up with his three Ph.D. sons in their 40s, all credentialed professors in their own right. Curious why they were there, as there were few people at camp even in this near summer solstice season. They explained that they were accomplished fishermen who got

together every year at a different, ever more exotic destination. We did not ask how they had found Clearwater, but they had portaged boats over to White Otter, too.

Asked what they were fishing with, we screwed up our faces when they responded, “Leeches.” They excused themselves early because they had planned a 3:00 A.M. departure. Much discussion ensued, first about how it was unnecessary to fish that early, as the water was so cold and the Walleye had eyes that were never bothered by bright sun. Moreover, we were appalled by fishing with the slimy leeches, although they were available at the bait shack.



Much repeated was the phrase “You can never troll slow enough.” All fishing was accomplished with the boat stern forward and the kicker in slow reverse. Although we were live bait gear fishermen, we did not consider ourselves to be meat fishermen, as we were after delicacies. Trolling with bait reel rods using live minnows weighted by heavy split shot - we knew what we were doing.

The adolescents preferred camp games to cold-water fishing, knowing they would make a buck to filet and can each fish for later consumption over the lean ice fishing winter months. We left at a leisurely 11:00 in the morning, wearing heavy coats to ward off wind-chilled cold lake air in our faces. Below the gunnels, the still air allowed the heat of the sun to be hot, and we were tormented by tiny flies that had pincers long and strong enough to bite us through heavy Levy’s.

Once on White Otter, we spied the four professors snoozing in tree shade under their yellow oil slicks on a rock slope of a protected bay of Big Island. We nodded knowingly for they had wasted needed sleep on a useless pursuit of Walleye in the pre-dawn hours.



We finally arrived at Walleye Bay, and the bite was on – I mean, really on, and we could not handle the fish as quickly as they came in. Untangling lines close to the boat meant two fish hooked. We caught our limit and then some. Licenses had been purchased for the kids left in camp, and although they did not fish, they miraculously caught their limit, too.

Keeping the fish alive, we sorted them for size as more came onboard, releasing the smaller fish in favor of the ever-larger fish it seemed we could catch forever.

The keepers were pulled onboard and we gunned the larger motor and sped to the portage for transport by foot back to Clearwater West. Loading the fish on the carrying oar, we were awed by the catch. Although only by chance, still, I had caught a six-pound Walleye, had I not?

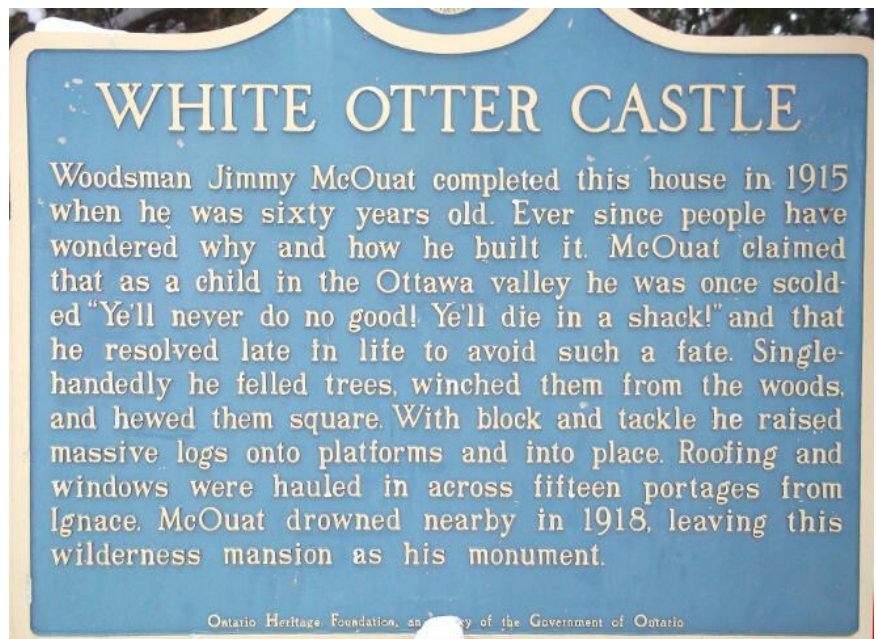
Back at camp late, we observed fishing etiquette by leaving our fish in the boat while we approached the ice house empty-handed, not wanting to gauchely boast our take. Won't the professors be embarrassed? Opening the door to the bright lights of the ice house, we stood speechlessly agape, staring at the professors' haul. Their smallest Walleye considerably outsized our largest. Believe me, there was a general run on the available leeches at the bait house that evening accompanied by much muttering about how the leeches were not all that repugnant after all.



A couple of George's buddies' wives who were on the trip had fried up potatoes and onions. The chefs seasoned some of our fresh walleye filets with lemon and paprika before expertly sautéing them in a garlic-infused grapeseed oil. Once plated, the filets appeared a tad undercooked but flaky with a little pink showing inside. They knew that the fish were still cooking and we ate as the pink changed to whiteish. Delicious. This was the simplest of the six recipes for Walleye that we ate in the next few days, each more elaborate than the one before.

Those who had been on these trips before approached the table with reverence, clutching a double-sized starched white linen napkin cloaked over their heads and plates to capture the aroma. This was the delicacy to be savored by a palate refined by pure Canadian air tinged with the scent of green spruce and red pine needles and perfected by the ambiance of the wilderness. Everything else was just an excuse to eat butter.

Later, I read about the scofflaw practices of some southern French gourmets, who captured tiny Ortolan songbirds in migration flight from Africa north, only to be close-caged and fattened in a dark room where the lights were turned on and then extinguished six times a day. The birds fed diurnally, only once a day in the morning, and were fooled into eating more often. They quickly fattened to bursting before being drowned in Armagnac and eaten a la the description in the Wine Spectator above. (I guess being a spectator absolves you from any guilt that may come from watching an illegal activity.)



Ontario Heritage Foundation, an agency of the Government of Ontario

We reached Walleye Bay the next afternoon, equipped with leeches for the newly cognoscenti. Minnows were for the timid; I raise my hand in confession. Nothing worked. (Just like the stock market, when the bite is on, the bite is on. And when the bite is off...) The decisions were made by the fish. Or maybe the first day was an occasion for mass piscatorial suicide; who knows?

So, 'Plan B' was on, for sport and to catch trout. We motored up to the portage for Emery (trout) Lake. The 12-foot boats were a little crowded but all was peaceful since we did not have to listen to the groan of a motor. It was a pleasure to row, and we had fun catching many trout, which we released in favor of the better-tasting Walleye, of which we had a surfeit already on ice.

We had time to portage back to White Otter and visit the splendid anomaly of White Otter Lake Log Castle. In description, please let the words embossed on the plaque (above) at the site do the talking.

This trip was full of revelations. On the 3rd night, to the campfire came three Minneapolis fly fishermen. Their replies to our inquiries were as follows: Yes, they had portaged a boat over to White Otter; yes,



they knew about fishing with leeches but used imitation *wet flies*, a variety of which they showed us. They had tied them. No, they dispensed with slow trolling backward, with a kicker in reverse. For them, the practice was too fast, too noisy and too smelly. After all, they were here for peace and tranquility. The only excitement that they craved was 'fish on.' They ever so slowly stripped weighted, sinking line that did not need split-shot lead. They moved silently from fishing spot to

fishing spot using boat oars. They released what they caught to be caught once more, only interested in keeping that which was needed for that night's dinner. They *always* caught fish, bite on or off; it did not matter. Wow.

We waved to them the next day as they stood quietly stripping fly line into a basket, hooting when they caught a Walleye. We had to admit that we were a little envious. But the proof would come that night before the pudding.

They brought their largest fish to the ice house. Strike that – their whale. The largest Walleye anyone had ever seen at nine pounds and 30 inches. My goodness.

Alas, it was hard to leave these kind people; it was great to spend time with my fun cousin. Tom was pretty much a wash since, for him, this was a drinking trip. Too hungover to fish most days, when he did fish, he was only enlivened by a periodic swig on the flask. Still, I was glad to have him as a companion for the long trip home. I confiscated his flask. Now, he could spell me for an hour or so at a time and watch for oncoming traffic.

The takeoff had been worrying me for some time. I instituted a short, rough field takeoff by rotating just off the runway to get into *ground effect* where we could fly at a low speed without stalling. I was

avoiding the rough stones on the runway, but the prop pulled them off anyway, and a couple of them were drawn into it.

The plane seemed to fly fine but could not achieve full speed. Diverting to the paved strip at Thunder Bay, I inspected the prop. Yes, the propeller was badly nicked. I borrowed a couple of files from an airplane mechanic who was too busy to attend to our plane until the next day. He advised filing the



nicks out as best we could with the heavy file and then smoothing with the lighter one. After a little sanding, the repair looked serviceable and we flew back home at top speed.

I returned the next year at my cousin's invitation. We had all enrolled in fly casting classes and purchased 8-weight fly rods and leech flies tied by others.

Epilogue

My business in St. Louis prospered. In far northern Lake Michigan, I bought an island lake peninsula with 1,300 feet of shoreline on Beaver's Lake Geneserath. After designing a Japanese home with a French roof, a contractor was employed to build the white cedar-clad vacation cabin that featured a 270-degree water view. I needed a faster airplane to get to the island. My credit was good enough to trade up to a 225-horsepower retractable gear Beechcraft Debonair, the precursor to the Bonanza.

Short and rough field takeoffs with a loaded airplane revealed that a 285-horsepower V-tailed Bonanza was better equipped for the task. The V35B was known as the 'fork-tailed doctor killer' because when side-slipped, you could stall one of the 'ruddervators' and put the airplane into a spiral. Once you knew that, it was fun to stall one on purpose and feel the rudder pedals flutter under your feet.

The airplane was expensive and so was the maintenance of it. To help pay for it, over the summer months, I charged a father and his son to fly back and forth from Traverse City, Michigan to St. Louis. The expense exceeded the fares collected.

The State of Michigan had cleverly bought all the commercial licenses for fishing on the Great Lakes. The correct thinking was that commercial fishing was wrecking the fishery and there was more money for the State's economy in recreational fishing. The lakes were restocked with transplanted Washington

Steelhead and salmon, and these fish prospered. Today, if you want to catch large specimens of those species, travel to Michigan.

However, the state could not mandate that the indigenous Ojibwa stop fishing. For 30 years, the Island Amerindians made a lot more money fishing for five months a year than any other businessman operating in the Beaver Archipelago did in a year. Their prey was primarily Whitefish, but took a lot of Lake Trout and some Atlantic Salmon, which they mostly gill-netted, netting them in traps. For a time, their pickup's bumper stickers mocked their critics with, "Jesus Was a Gill-Netter Too."

To supplement my income from passenger fares, I adopted the time-honored profession of fishmonger. I bought Whitefish for a dollar a pound (\$5.00 adjusted for Inflation.) Preferred for making Gefilte Fish, the price doubled just before Passover. Receiving twice my investment, I transported 400 pounds



per trip to fish shops at St. Louis fish sellers. With the passengers, I paid for the plane. The three fish sellers had different clientele based upon social class: snooty-high-class who would only buy fish fileted, skin off both sides; middle-class folks would buy filets and whole fish but were squeamish if heads had not been removed; and frankly, my most discerning customers - lower-class

Jews and Blacks who insisted that they look their purchase in the eye to tell freshness and would only buy, 'fish in the round,' heads on.

Lake trout and salmon were also popular in land-locked St. Louis back in the '80s. To me, unless of pure strain, they were weird – either short and fat, shaped like a football, or long like an eel. The whitefish did not want anything to do with any of them.

The Indigenous Indians ate the fish three times a day and would smoke enough for when the fish were out of season. They all died out from PVC-induced cancers.

Just after the ice went out in the Spring, the prized Yellow Perch were trapped, and I bought 100 pounds at a premium. In the same family as Walleye and just as tasty, a real treat for Great Lakes aficionados. However, the proprietor of the re-seller who had bought them called to tell me not to bring him anymore because they were just sitting. When I came back the next week, he inspected the catch and asked, "Where are the perch?" He said that all his customers were demanding them. I reminded him of what I had been told, asking how he had sold out. He took me around the corner and showed me the sign on the case which read, 'Canadian Bass.' Ahh, the power of marketing.

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