

Fishing

Back in Nebraska, when I was a kid, we took fishing very seriously. Fishing in the Midwest was not only a form of recreation but also a way of putting food on the table. In fact, every year our whole clan would go to Minnesota and rent an entire lake, along with all the cabins and boats. We fished for a whole week and stored each day's catch in an old icehouse. At the end of our vacation, an uncle would load a horse tank on his flat-bed truck and haul all the fish back to Nebraska where the catch would be neatly wrapped and stored.



After we left Nebraska, my dad and I continued to try our hand at fishing. While living in Portland, Oregon, Dad bought a little boat, and we frequently took it out on the Willamette River to troll for salmon. We saw lots of other boats trolling but never saw anyone catch a fish—not a salmon or any other kind of fish.

Many years later, I had an opportunity to go salmon fishing with my father-in-law, Emil Smith, who at that time was living in Santa Maria, California. Emil and his youngest son Rocky and I went out on his 18' boat and caught several large salmon. I was amazed. After all the trolling we'd done up in Portland I was beginning to lose faith that sport fishers could ever hope to catch a salmon.

We did have an incident of sorts on this outing. Emil had advised me several times to get a fishing license well before the trip, assuring me that the Fish and Game people watched the San Luis Bay area very carefully for illegal fishing. Well of course I forgot to get one. After we'd been out on the water for a couple hours and had caught several fish, Emil casually asked if I had my license. Before I could give a negative response, the Fish and Game boat came over the horizon at high speed, motoring directly toward us. Emil thought about the problem for a moment and then told me to get my line out of the water and get behind the steering wheel. When the Fish and Game people arrived, he assured them that I was "only driving" and, since they apparently were not in the mood to make any arrests, they let me get away with it. But Emil didn't. He made it clear that the incident had not improved his opinion of me.

Emil was so taken with salmon fishing that he bought a commercial boat and planned to retire from his aerospace job and become a full-time salmon fisherman. It was a beautiful old boat and a wonderful dream, but he died of cancer before realizing any of it. Another victim of tobacco and a man I dearly miss.

Nowadays people fish for very different reasons. The most popular thing to do is called “catch and release.” The primary assumption behind this practice is that fish enjoy being caught and admired. People spend their whole day out on the water catching fish, admiring them and then throwing them back into the water.

I wonder if hunters have ever given any consideration to this catch and release stuff? Can you imagine a hunter running down a deer, holding on to it while someone takes his picture, and then releasing it? It would be even trickier for bird hunters, but it should be possible with enough stealth.

Sometime about twenty years ago, about the time Emil died, I gave up on fishing. The whole idea of spending hours out in a boat waiting for a fish to bite lost its magic. The boat part didn't bother me; it was the waiting. Of course, back then I was a smoker and a beer drinker so that gave me something to do. When I wasn't puffing away on my pipe or drinking beer, I spent my time coughing and peeing. Time passes pretty fast that way.

But this is not a knock on fishing. I know that a lot of folks love to fish, probably just as much as I love to play golf—and no sport is made fun of more than golf. But still, somehow I wish that fishing could be made fun again for me. Every time I see some fishing tackle I start thinking about maybe getting a license and drowning a few worms, but the thought passes. Without beer and smokes, it just wouldn't be fun anymore.