Bass Fishing in Lancaster County

By John D. Long, Ph.D.

As a "young man" of eighty years, I have two passions—I love to play tennis and I love to fish. I'm not as adept at either as I was at twenty, but I still get a thrill from a good volley and an equal charge from a bass strike. Let me tell you about my bass fishing in Lancaster County.

As a young boy, I listened many times to my father and two of my uncles, as they talked with great devotion of their bass fishing trips to the Conestoga or Susquehanna Rivers. I dreamed of the time when I would be old enough to accompany them and to catch one of those legendary prizes. For, to those of us who know, a bass is a very special fish—a breed apart from other freshwater species. A catfish, walleye or pickerel may make a delicious meal but only a bass really "strikes" and fights to the end to stay alive in the stream.

At last, one summer's day in late June, when I was perhaps twelve, my father took me under the old covered bridge over the Conestoga near Eden. The bridge is long since gone in one of the hurricanes and replaced by a wide concrete structure of more utility but of no real charm. We cast our lines from a pier only a few feet back from the water's edge and topped by the bridge floor, perhaps six feet above. This combination made it difficult to cast, but my Dad was equal to the task. He stripped line from the reel and formed it into loops that he held in his left hand. With his right, he grasped the line about three feet from the hook and, releasing the held line

at the same time, he whirled the bait about fifteen feet from shore. This is an inelegant way of casting, but it worked well for Dad, who used it most of his life.

And speaking of bait, we used live minnows that we bought from a man who lived on East Marion Street in Lancaster. He had a large tank in his back yard fed with city water, where he always kept some five hundred to a thousand minnows, mostly chubs. In 1919, chlorine in the water was no threat to fish life, since little was used to purify the "pure" water coming directly from the Conestoga. Nor was the one cent per minnow that he charged a real drawback to fishing. For a quarter, one had a whole day's supply of bait, when considering the relative infrequency of strikes at our favorite holes.

After "casting" came "waiting." There was some current where we fished so that our line constantly moved as we watched carefully. We fished "deadline"—that is, without a float, since Dad felt it more sporting, difficult, and professional. After a long time, our line suddenly retreated toward shore and then started outward. Dad grabbed the rod and waited for the strike, which never came. After a while, he stripped line until the dead minnow appeared. The bait was "scaled" so we thought a bass had taken it, but for some reason had not swallowed it. Dad baited up and cast again but, for some time, nothing happened. Just as he was filling his pipe for a smoke, the reel screamed and we had our first "honest to goodness" strike. In the "accepted" manner, he let the fish run until the reel stopped, but when it screeched again, he pulled and set the hook. It was a small ten-inch bass (a "keeper" under Pennsylvania law) and we ate it for supper.

Why didn't Dad pull on the first run? Because he (and most fishermen) believed that a bass usually grabbed the bait by the tail end, just behind the head and scaled it first. These were evidently very fastidious fish in those early days, which, like humans, disliked to eat fish scales. According to the theory, when the reel stopped, the bass had finished scaling and was turning the bait to swallow it head first and take off. This second run was accordingly the time to set the hook. On subsequent trips, Dad and I had many discussions about this theory. I only half believed it, but to this day, I hesitate to pull on the first run when using live bait.

That day at Eden was the beginning of my fishing career, which was never very productive of big fish, but always enjoyable. From then on, Dad and I fished the Conestoga at many places and later the Susquehanna. We bought our bait at first, but later both Dad and I enjoyed catching our own minnows from the many small runs that held them. A favorite spot for bait fish was under a bridge on Butter Road, where the small run had gouged a deep hole in which the fish gathered. Another good spot was above a large dam in Lititz Creek just east of Oregon Pike. Another favorite was the Little Conestoga near Oreville. There were many others, all readily accessible.

Today, the small streams have dwindled and there are few deep holes and fewer minnows in them.

To catch minnows for bait, we filed the barbs off small hooks, since the small fish must not be harmed in catching. We needed a very small cork float, ten to fifteen feet of line, and a rod. Earthworms were the lures. We had no problem getting them since we had a chicken house at the end of our back yard where the earth was rich with good worms. Before the present Emanuel Lutheran Church was built, we would hunt for "night crawlers" on the church lawn (across from our house at 541 West Walnut Street), always at night, with a flashlight and after a heavy rain. These were preferred bait, not only for catching minnows, but also for bass, who took them readily as well.

To catch bait fish, we would drop our line above a deep hole and let it float into it. When the cork went under, we pulled the little fish out. We usually caught twenty to thirty minnows in an hour, although as time went on, more people fished and bait were harder to come by.

We later got our bait by "stir-seining" rather than fishing for them. We wore hip boots to wade the streams and stir under the banks with a small net stretched between two broom sticks. In this manner we caught lots of small fish, all suitable for bass bait. Some, however, were preferred. We liked chubs, shiners, stone catties, and yellow stripers. Chubs are active fish and live well on the line as do stone catties. Shiners and yellow stripers are attractive lures, but survive less well.

One must be careful with stone catties since they have dorsal and lateral fins with sharp spines. These can readily dig into your hand and if the stab wound becomes infected, "blood poisoning" results. My uncle George had this happen to him and the result was a stiff finger after surgery. He had the surgeon bend the finger into a crook so that he could continue to use it in his profession of watchmaker.

We usually got our bait the afternoon before the day we went bass fishing, so they were kept overnight in a bait bucket under an outside running-water tap. The next morning we threw away any dead fish before taking off for the river.

We had two favorite spots on the Conestoga along the Butter Road. One was at the "big rock" and the other was at the "old lime kiln" located a mile or so below the turn in the road where it follows the river north past the "big rock."

The Butter Road is still along the river and still well traveled, but today it is asphalt-topped and usable in any weather. Not so, in the early 1900s, when we used it to go fishing. Then it was a mud road—particularly after a storm or heavy shower. On one fishing trip, my Uncle Will was along. He was retired (as president of a small structural steel company) and normally drove a horse pulling a light carriage. On this occasion, Dad was driving

our first automobile (a 1915 Maxwell). On a curve, the car skidded and spun around twice, completely out of control. Uncle Will did his best to help by yelling, "Whoa Bessie - Whoa!" Finally, we straightened out and continued to the "big rock," where we fished for an hour or more. The same storm that muddied the road made the river muddy and we had no strikes.

The "old lime kiln" was a heap of limestone rocks that had originally been the walls of a kiln for converting limestone to lime by the simple means of heating it with a charcoal or wood fire to drive off the carbon dioxide gas. Lancaster County in those days was dotted with abandoned lime kilns since lime had been in urgent demand for sweetening soil and making mortar for brick and stone building construction. But with the disappearance of the forests, fuel was no longer readily available and these simple kilns were abandoned and became ruins all over the county.

At the "old lime kiln," our fishing luck was usually pretty good and in a couple of hours we ordinarily had a few strikes and perhaps a small bass or two.

Another good fishing spot in the Conestoga was just below the hosiery mill at Brownstown. Ecology was an unknown science in my early fishing days, and the mill regularly dumped unused dye of various colors into the river so we always saw pockets of color along the shore. We vaguely disliked the practice and complained that "there ought to be a law against it."

Perhaps a half mile below the mill the colors were gone and we fished there. One afternoon Dad caught a nice bass about fourteen inches long and a pound and a half in weight. It was the largest fish we had caught. On our next trip, I caught a fifteen-inch fish—my biggest for a long time. For several years Brownstown was a favorite fishing hole.

My father was a paint salesman "on the road" and worked every day, traveling in Lancaster and neighboring counties. He never took a real vacation of a week or more, but since he was his own boss, he took an afternoon or a day off from time to time during the fishing season. He always had his fishing tackle in the car's trunk, so we were ready to fish on short notice. For many years, we fished only in the Conestoga.

Another of our favorite spots there was under the covered bridge at Martindale where we caught many small bass on live bait. One day we had no strikes during several hours. A farmer living nearby stopped and asked about our luck. When we told him that we had no fish, he asked if we had ever used "hojacks." We said, "No! What are they?" It turned out he was speaking of hellgrammites (the larval form of dragon flies) and he showed me how to get them, using a net and turning over stones in the swift water of the stream. Then he showed us where to fish with them—below a small dam. I had a great time catching small bass.

Later we learned that these hellgrammites are found only in the Conestoga and a few of the other larger creeks, but are absent from the small runs

where good bait fish are found. Many years later I used hellgrammites very successfully in Lovering Lake in Quebec, Canada.

Below Martindale on the Conestoga is the village of Hinkletown where we fished occasionally above a dam. On one trip, Uncle Will was with us again. He loved to fish, but paid little attention to his tackle. He used an old split bamboo rod with guides half falling off, and his line was old and weak in spots. Before he baited up he always tested the line by breaking off short lengths until he reached a good strong section. Dad and Uncle George had both predicted that he would be sorry sometime that he hadn't bought new and better tackle.

Today was the day he was sorry! He threw his bait out between two big sycamore trees (a favorite hole) and almost as soon as it hit the water, he had a vicious strike. He hooked the bass and rather skillfully began to bring it in. It was a big fish and fought hard for perhaps fifteen minutes. Finally, he pulled it close to shore. Dad had slipped down the bank to the water's edge holding to one of the trees and called to Will to edge his line over to where he could grab the leader and throw the fish out on the bank. But Will wasn't having any of his help and he told Dad so in no uncertain terms: "Keep your fingers off of my line, I'll land him alone." Unfortunately, just as he lifted his rod to swing the fish up on the land, the old rod broke and the line parted.

We were all disappointed and let down, but Uncle Will was physically ill. Even though we had just arrived, he wanted to go home and swore he would never go fishing again. He never did—shortly after this episode he suffered a stroke and died.

The Pequea

The Pequea Creek rises in eastern Lancaster County and flows generally westward through southern Lancaster County to empty into the Susquehanna. It is a small stream and Dad and I had never seriously considered fishing in it for bass. However, a customer of Dad's told him one day that there were bass in the stream, and so one afternoon we decided to try our luck.

After all these years I have forgotten where we entered the creek, but I remember we both waded it in hip boots, working downstream along the banks, searching for a good fishing hole. We found a rock ledge that extended under water halfway across the stream. Below was a nice little deep basin where we caught bass for an hour. They were small fish of a half to a pound in weight, but we had great sport and caught the allowable daily limit. When we left we were sure we had found a new fishing spot, known to us alone.

Alas, the next time we went there we had no strikes and concluded that we had fished out the Pequea Creek in one afternoon.

The Susquehanna

After several years of fishing the Conestoga, we finally got brave enough to try fishing the mighty Susquehanna River at Washington Boro. Fishing from shore was not attractive since at that time (1920) coal dust filled the river and created bars at many locations along the Lancaster County shore. The fine coal came from the anthracite mines of Carbon County near Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. In fact, there was so much fine coal in the river that several dredges worked the stream from Harrisburg to Washington Boro recovering coal for sale.

We needed a boat to fish in the mainstream, off the rocks that poked up out of the water and provided holes and eddies where we hoped bass lurked.

Dad learned of a young man living in Washington Boro, who, to supplement his income, occasionally built skiffs for fishing purposes. After much inquiry, we located Mr. Kauffman and, on introduction, he agreed to take Uncle George, Dad, and me out on the river one afternoon. He had a nice little skiff, which he propelled by "poling." The "pole" is a stout oak or ash staff about twelve feet long, varying in diameter from about two and one-half inches where held, to perhaps a flattened four inches across near the submerged end, which has a steel nib. A skilled riverman can easily push a boat rapidly over shallow water, and in deep water he can scull in a manner similar to that of a Venetian gondolier. However, to "pole" a boat, one must be strong and agile in order to avoid running aground on submerged rocks.

The Susquehanna at Washington Boro is about a mile in width. With the exception of a deep channel near the Lancaster County shore, the river is shallow with hundreds of exposed rocks from which to fish. We left shore and headed for a cut between two small wooded islands, crossed the deep channel, and began searching for a good fishing hole. We all looked for a rock with swift water on each side and a deep eddy below, but finally settled for the remains of a small dam with many breaks. Kauffman poled the boat in close to one of the breaks and we started fishing. Dad and Uncle George caught some small bass, but the best strike was on Kauffman's line. He missed the fish and we all thought him very inept, since he tried to set the hook by stopping the spinning reel, rather than by stopping the outgoing line and pulling up on the rod.

We put him down as "a good riverman, but a poor fisherman." Later, he confessed to be more interested in duck hunting on the river, rather than bass fishing in it. Just the same, this afternoon was a happy and successful fishing trip, particularly so since Kauffman agreed to build us a skiff, which he did over the next winter season. The next spring we put the boat in the

Conestoga just above its mouth in the Susquehanna. From that time on, the Conestoga was too slow for us and we fished the "River" exclusively.

Safe Harbor

The summer before our boat was built we tried fishing at Safe Harbor—where the Conestoga enters the Susquehanna. We fished from shore, off a big sand and coal bank. Enos Strickler, a family friend, lived across the street from us and he, too, was an avid bass fisherman. On our first trip he caught a really big "Susquehanna River Salmon" (a walleyed pike), and Dad and I landed some nice bass as well. We were both convinced that Safe Harbor was the place to fish in the "River," which explains why, when our boat was ready, we launched it and berthed it there in the Conestoga. A farmer, who had a home near our mooring agreed to keep an eye on our boat and store it in his barn during the winter. Incidentally, he had a deep well from which we pumped the most deliciously cold water to slake our thirst after a day on the river.

At Safe Harbor, the Susquehanna is perhaps a half to three-quarters of a mile in width. Near the Lancaster County shore (similar to the river at Washington Boro), there is a channel, found by the surveyors for the prospective hydroelectric dam to be about eighty feet deep and some thirty feet across. Beyond this channel, as is usual with the Susquehanna, the water is comparatively shallow, with lots of rocks from which to fish. Our "modus operandi" was to locate a nice big rock with swift water on either side and a deep eddy below, row the boat against the rock, and hold it there with an anchor at each end. At first we used heavy stones attached to strong clotheslines as anchors. Later, when we "got smarter," we had two three-pronged steel anchors made, but they were so effective in gripping the rock bottom that we couldn't raise them, so we cut the lines, left them at the bottom of the river, and again used stones for anchors.

The old Pennsylvania Railroad has two branches running along the river at Safe Harbor. The one called the local Port Deposit line is perhaps twenty feet above the river, and the Low Grade line is about one hundred feet above it. The latter provided us with amusement while fishing. We often counted the one hundred to one hundred and twenty-five freight cars that were commonly hauled by each train.

After fishing at a location for a half hour or so, and having had no strikes, we would move to another rock and try again. Usually we had our lunch about noon and inevitably as soon as we bit into a sandwich or a cookie, we had a strike. If we had a poor day with few strikes from the rocks, we would pull up anchor and troll in the deeper water for an hour or so, before quitting for the day.

One day we arrived at the River and found a stiff, gusty breeze blowing. Due to the breeze, current, and submerged rocks, we had a bad time getting out to where we hoped to fish, but finally we pulled onto a big flat rock lying just above the water level. The breeze made casting difficult, and we agreed to try fishing for an hour and if no luck, to return to shore and go home. However, our bait had hardly hit the water when Dad and I each had a vicious strike and caught two nice bass. We forgot the wind and continued to catch bass all afternoon! Some were undersized and had to be thrown back, but most were "keepers." That day we went home with ten nice fish, which we proudly showed to our neighbors who were assembled to greet us with friendly taunts about "fisherman's luck—a wet tail and a hungry gut."

A week later we returned to the same flat rock and again caught some nice bass. This feat seemed so remarkable that Dad later painted a large square on the rock so that we could find it no matter what the height of the water. He also painted other rocks where we had caught fish. I argued against doing this, since it seemed to me to be unsportsmanlike. No matter! After a year we couldn't find any of the paint marks, and so returned to being real, natural fishermen again.

I mentioned that we often went fishing with Uncle George, whom both Dad and I admitted to be a much better fisherman than either of us. On this particular Saturday, George's son, "Red," was along too. He and Dad fished from one boat and Uncle George and I from another "hired" boat. I preferred this arrangement since I felt sure I would learn something from such a super fisherman. All of us had strikes and caught a few fish, but nothing large or unusual for several hours. Uncle George had just pulled in his line, found the bait dead, and so put on a new minnow, and dropped it in beside the boat preparatory to casting. Suddenly the reel screeched and the rod bent as the bass dove for deeper water. Ten minutes later George hauled in a five-pound small-mouth bass. That turned out to be the largest fish any of us had caught on any of our fishing trips to the "River." A few minutes later, "Red" held up a nice-sized fish that he also had caught during our excitement. He called to us that his bass was larger than his father's, but when we reached shore and compared them, there was no contest between Uncle George's five-pound fish and "Red's" two-pounder.

Occasionally we would fish for bass and walleyes in the tail race of the dam at Holtwood. At that time there were no decent roads to this section of the river, and so we would go by street car and train. Dad and I would get up at five o'clock, eat a quick breakfast, and walk from our house on Walnut Street to the corner of Charlotte and Chestnut Streets to catch the street car to Millersville. There we would take another "Toonerville Trolley" bound for Pequea. This car was rather primitive, with a coal-fired turret stove for heat and hardwood seats and benches. Arriving at Pequea, we would

walk to the railroad "station" (a shed) and wait for the morning train from Columbia to Port Deposit, Maryland. This was a two-car train with baggage and passenger cars. If we made all connections and the train was on time, we would start fishing in the tail race by eight-thirty or nine o'clock. Once in a while we would stay on the train to the next stop at Star Rock, where we fished another deep hole from shore. In the late afternoon, we would wearily climb the steep paths back to the railroad and retrace our steps by train and street cars back home to Lancaster, usually arriving by six-thirty.

My fishing days on the river lasted even after I left home for graduate work at Lehigh and Penn State, since I came home occasionally over weekends. One of these times occurred in early December. We arrived at Holtwood thoroughly chilled by the cold weather, and so built a fire before we began to fish. We finally baited up and began fishing. After a short time our lines froze to the rods, but later the ice sublimed and freed the lines. As I remember it, we caught two big "Susquehanna River salmon," but no bass.

Today the "river" still flows and I'm told the "small mouths" are still there. Alas, the legs are not up to the river hills any more, so my fishing is only in easier places like Speedwell Forge Lake and the Octorara Water Reservoir. But the memories of the Conestoga and the Susquehanna fishing days are still with me and make me smile.

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