Bait

Anglers, once upon a time, used everything from nightcrawlers and maggots to frogs and even ducklings—impaled on a hook, alive and wiggling.

By Richard Chiappone

The first time I saw the Presti brothers, they were sprinkling coffee grounds across the front lawn of the little GI Bill house my family had just moved into, one block inland from the Niagara River. It was 1953, and the youngest Presti, Cosmo, and I would start kindergarten together at Pacific Avenue Elementary in a few days.

Neither 5-year-old Cosmo nor I had yet contracted the uncontrollable obsession with catching fish that still plagues me today. But his older brothers, already afflicted with that madness, had been harvesting nightcrawlers from that front lawn for a couple years. What the Presti brothers knew, and what I learned eventually, was that with a level-wind bait-casting rig, a half-ounce bell sinker, a package of snelled hooks, and an empty coffee can full of fresh-picked worms, a boy could catch almost everything that swam in the Niagara.

Cosmo and I came down with the fever soon enough. And since the only treatment (and not much of a cure) for the fishing disease is fishing itself, we picked worms most summer nights for the next ten years.

It's probably safe to say that the common earthworm—our "nightcrawlers" being the fattest, thickest, and longest North American member of the *Annelida* family—is the "gateway" substance that ushers most young boys into the addiction we call angling. Like millions of young anglers before us, Cosmo and I caught our first fish—stoneroller chubs—on half a worm.

All summer long throughout our grade school years, our lawns looked like rice paddies as we let the garden hose run and run until our parents yelled at us. Evenings, after the last hide-and-seek games fizzled out, and the faint blue glow of TV game shows or *Bonanza* emanated from living room windows, we crept on hands and knees across the soggy grass, flashlight beams dancing before us as we tugged stretchy nightcrawlers from their holes. We suffered wet knees, mosquito bites, fingers punctured by thorny red barberry clippings, and less painful but far worse, surprise handfuls of undetected dog droppings. But we got bait.

Neither Cosmo's father nor mine fished, and so our angling was limited to places along the river we could reach on foot or bicycle. That meant behind the cement docks, behind the water plant, behind Hooker Chemical Co. This was nearly two decades before the Clean Water Act; the city of Niagara Falls is downstream from the steel mills of Buffalo, the automakers of Detroit, and the stockyards of Chicago.

Most days, if we caught anything, we caught chubs, carp, a stunted white bass or two. A good day was one with a rock bass in it, and we went fishless altogether on many. If angling were a team sport, our mascot would have been a skunk.

For much of the 1950s, gathering bait was almost always more satisfying than fishing with it. Then, the summer after fifth grade, a small, two-bedroom home, a lot like mine, sprang up on the vacant lot next door. At first I mourned the loss of my secret hiding places in the sticky milkweeds, the garter snakes and toads I often caught there, the snow forts and clubhouses made of scrounged building supplies my pals and I would no longer be constructing. But when a boy my own age, Danny Humic, moved into the new house, everything changed for me. Danny's father, a serious fisherman, owned a boat.

A boat! I wouldn't have been more excited if a troupe of female nudists had set up camp there.

This came at an opportune time. Cosmo Presti, my staunch fishing pal, was impossibly handsome, and by this time not only had he discovered girls, they'd discovered him. To my great disappointment, Cosmo combed his hair back into a ducktail, set his fishing rod aside, and began practicing the Twist. Far too shy to dance with (or even talk to) girls, I found myself in need of a new best friend.

Enter Danny Humic. Danny was an only child, and Mr. Humic was happy to bring me along on their fishing trips. The Humic's boat—a ten-foot Grumman aluminum skiff with a 7½-horsepower Mercury motor—fit on top of their Ford Fairlane station wagon.

For the next five years or so, we took it out almost every summer weekend, fishing the upper Niagara from the steel mills in Lackawanna downstream to the treacherous Navy Island drifts just a couple short miles above the deadly falls. When we really felt adventurous, we car-topped the boat up into Ontario, north of Toronto, where we camped and fished Georgian Bay, Lake Simcoe, and the Kawartha Lakes.

My bait-fishing horizons expanded. Winters, we jigged through thick Lake Erie ice for perch and smelt, impaling the larvae from goldenrod galls on bright chrome hooks. Right after ice-out in the spring, we fished small shiner minnows for fat bullheads in Jordan Harbor off Lake Ontario. Summers on the Niagara we drifted for black bass with chubs, carefully threaded through the lips, learning to resist the urge to set the hook on the first bite, instead opening the bails on our new Garcia Mitchell 300 spinning reels and feeding out line until the smallmouths had turned the bait in their mouths.

We caught grasshoppers and crickets and fished them on fine wire hooks for wild brook trout in small clear streams up on the Bruce Peninsula. We fished for monster spring-run rainbows in

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the Finger Lakes streams using huge wood grubs with frightening pincers. And yes, we fished with worms too.

Danny's father expropriated the insulated aluminum milk box in which the Wendt's Dairy delivery man left his bottles by the Humic side door. We never went anywhere without it—full of peat moss and nightcrawlers.

I've been in Alaska now for more than 30 years, where live bait is prohibited by Fish and Game regulations to limit the invasion of non-native species. I haven't impaled anything alive on a hook for decades, and one of the things I miss is the wonderful variety of predator fish that live bait attracted—including species you'll rarely catch on a lure or a fly.

Eels, for example, provided us endless hours of entertainment in addition to various members of the catfish family, yellow suckers, and even carp. I find it somewhat surprising that the lowly carp is now recognized as a respectable fly rod fish, and that there are carp fly patterns, carp guides, probably a line of carp fishing clothes and sunglasses. Fine. I don't doubt the difficulty of fooling them, their selectiveness, or their fighting capabilities. I just cannot erase the first couple decades of my life spent spearing them, shooting them, or otherwise disrespecting them. But the hardest thing to forget is the way they made their living rooting through the industrial wastewaters of my youth. Though now that I've written that, I have to admit I spent a lot of my youth doing just that myself, and calling it fishing.

The bait I remember most vividly from my early days were the live frogs we used to fish for walleyes in the Kawartha Lakes in the mid-'60s. It was a happy time in my life and their names pierce me like a laser of sentimentality—Buckhorn Lake, Pigeon Lake, Rice Lake—leaving me aching with romantic longing in a way none of my high school girlfriends' names do. Obviously, a guy who is most nostalgic about weedy Canadian lakes he fished 50 year ago does not (unlike Cosmo Presti) have vast numbers of girlfriends to remember—or forget.

When Danny's father heard through the local fishing grapevine that the walleyes in the Kawartha's were fools for live frogs, Danny and I hung his minnow bucket off the handlebars of his bike, lashed a long-handled net to the cross-bar of mine, and pedaled across the massive Grand Island Bridge to Buckhorn State Park, an undeveloped tract of swampland and cattails occupying the north end of the big island in the middle of the Niagara River.

It was June, and the resident leopard and pickerel frogs had just absorbed their tadpole tails and sprouted legs. They were an inch or two long, the perfect size for bait. We caught dozens of them. That Friday, when Danny's father came home from the plant, we threw the aluminum skiff on the car-tops and drove up into Canada, the frogs hopping madly about in the minnow bucket, making a racket like a drum solo. This was 40 years before the 9/11 attacks changed everything; the border guards didn't even lift the little trap door on top and look inside.

Fishing with live frogs is not for the faint at heart. I must say I would not even consider it now, at my age, close enough to death myself to resist inflicting a gruesome demise on anything smaller and weaker than myself. If that sounds a little prissy, sue me. I guess, with age, instead of wisdom, I got squeamish empathy.

But at 14, with just the vaguest concept of mortality whispering for attention in a brain clogged with either fishing or sex fantasies, I drifted on the breeze across the Kawartha Lakes in the Humics' little aluminum skiff with a live frog hooked through the chin, a couple split-shot on the line to sink it to fishy levels. Just as we did when fishing with large chubs for bass, we would open the bail of our reels when a walleye bit on a frog, waiting—more or less patiently—for the predator to swallow its prey.

However, being 14 years old, patience was a quality neither Danny nor I possessed in abundance, and we often struck too soon. If you have ever seen the open maw of a walleye—a cavern, lined with needle-sharp teeth—you can imagine what a prematurely-jerked frog might look like. Often, only the head would remain on the hook, severed from the body with the precision you see when a shark cuts a hooked bonefish in half. And that was a relatively merciful way for a frog to depart this life. Sometimes only the hind legs were snipped off. Sometimes a frog would return to the boat, more or less intact, but with its spotted skin dangling inside-out from the toes of its webbed feet. I hate to admit that none of this bothered me at the time. In retrospect, I feel less guilty when I consider the relatively minor cruelty of frog abuse against the larger backdrop of the mayhem and violence we lived with in the 1960s. Still, if I get to the Pearly Gates and find a large spotted amphibian in charge, I'll know I'm in trouble.

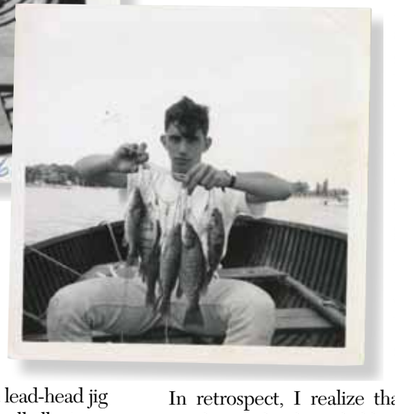
I think I quit fishing with frogs the day I hooked one on my line and made a forceful cast into Burnt Ship Creek, under the NY State Thruway bridge, an old stone structure built in 1935. I was using a new-fangled Zebco push-button reel, unaware that—without the drag of the spool—the velocity of each cast had increased exponentially. The hooked frog hit the cobblestone face of the bridge going about the speed of the thruway traffic overhead. Realistically, I suppose that was a lot kinder death than it faced among the pike I hoped to catch with it. But whenever I go back East to visit family, and drive over that little stone bridge, I can hear that terrible froggy *smack* still echoing across the lily pads.

Of course, some animals are simply cuter and therefore harder to brutalize than others. In a small tackle shop somewhere up in Canada, Danny Humic and I puzzled aloud over a display of fine wire harnesses with big treble hooks dangling off them. The owner explained ruefully that they weren't for sale, because, "nowadays, people don't like to see you fishing for northerns with live ducklings." No, I suppose they didn't—even in those days.

Fishing is a blood sport. Anyone who says differently is kidding himself. And yet, many of us set aside our childish bait-fishing ways to take up the high ground precepts of catch-and-release fly fishing, and actually try to deny that harsh truth. It was Keats who coined the term "negative capability," which he described as being able to hold two contrary ideas in your mind without going batty. It's a handy facility for a fisherman here in Alaska.

For the past 30 years, I've being able to take up fly fishing, mostly for trout, with all its attendant high moral poses, yet happily continue to use bait to catch mostly salmon and halibut—and eat them. That means I never really forget that catch-and-release fishing is the cruelest sport of all. Without the excuse of feeding oneself, there is really no explaining why we do what we do to fish. "Torment and release" would be closer to the truth. Still, I'm not hanging up the fly rod any time soon. That's one more thing I hope I never have to explain to any higher power.

Ah, those lazy days of summer when the bait-fishing is easy. The author in 1966 at age 18, holding his catch of largemouths, perch, and rock bass at Port Colborne in Ontario.



Living in Alaska, my freshwater fishing is done exclusively with flies now. But out there on the briny deep of Cook Inlet, all rules are off. Sometimes it's just a matter of physics; it would be mighty hard to get a fly down to halibut, rockfish, or lingcod in 150 feet of water with the tide running. We either tie on a two-pound sinker and stab a chunk of herring onto a circle hook, or lower a lead-head jig the size of a respectable trout down to the fish. We troll all winter for kings using downriggers, flasher-dodgers, and small herring, using a long needle to thread the leader through the vent and out the mouth. That would obviously be painful for the herring, if they were not already dead, conveniently killed by the good folks at Alaska Bait Co. It is nice to have someone else doing the dirty work. But forget all the squishy, squeamish modern concerns about just how murderous it's okay to be. Let's face it: clubbing a sea-bright salmon to death and cutting its gills to bleed it out is pretty exciting.

And you never know when your mannered fly fishing ways will intersect with the bloody exigencies of meat hunting. The summer of 1994 I was working on the construction of a new school in the remote Alaska Peninsula village of Chignik Bay. The cannery there processed the local sockeye harvest, and discharged the offal from all those gutted salmon into the bay. That attracted halibut, a species generally beyond the reach of shore-bound anglers. Here, the big flatfish came right up to the rocky shoreline.

I hadn't brought any meat-fishing tackle with me; I thought I would find rainbow trout or char in the streams that the salmon ran up. So, I brought my first expensive fly rod, a 5-weight "light line series" from Sage, a gift from my wife. Alas, there was no fishable freshwater near the remote job site.

I discovered, however, that some of the carpenters and sheet-rockers had been catching halibut off a rocky point jutting into the bay—although nobody had a rod or reel. They showed me how it was done. Taking a hundred feet of heavy white construction string (used for laying out foundations, etc.), we tied on one of the massive steel nuts used to bolt down the structural steel beams that supported the building, and a circle hook purchased at the Chignik village store. I begged a few scraps of salmon from the back door of the cannery and walked to the rocks. I brought my fly rod too. I'm not sure why.

As instructed, I baited the hook, then whirled the business end of the rig over my head like a lasso and let it fly. I was standing on the line when it jerked violently, sending the bait flying off the hook; I actually saw a huge halibut cruise in and gobble it. I managed to talk myself out of a heart attack, re-baited, and cast a second time. This one landed in a kelp bed to my right, and by the time I yanked it loose, the bait was gone once more. I had one decent piece of salmon belly left. The third cast was good. But when the bite came, transmitted directly through the line to my hand, I yanked back—forgetting everything I'd learned about fishing with frogs and chubs so many years prior. I jerked the hook out of the halibut's mouth. I was out of bait.

So, I rigged the fly rod, tied a wooly bugger on the tippet, and cast out along the edge of the weeds. I soon had a small, colorful Pacific greenling in hand. I cut it into pieces, and set the fly rod aside. Fully aware of the ironies involved with using a graphite fly rod to catch bait for a handline, I cast the heavy steel bolt and baited circle hook out into the bay once more.

In retrospect, I realize that a better fisherman could have certainly caught those halibut on a sink tip and some kind of flashy, fishy-looking streamer. Still, of all the memorable fish I've landed with purist fly-fishing lures—from a big Henry's Fork rainbow I caught on a size 20 pheasant tail nymph, a ten-pound Bahamian bonefish caught on a Kaufman's shrimp pattern, and a nearly 20-pound Gulf of Alaska silver salmon caught on a bunch of orange marabou lashed to a Gamakatsu hook—I have to say that landing a five-pound "chicken" halibut off those rocks, using some carpenter string and a gob of greenling guts, remains, to this day, one of the most exciting moments in a lifetime of fishing.

I just wish Danny Humic and the Presti brothers had been there to see it. ■

Note: This story will appear in Richard Chiappone's next book, *Liar's Code*, available this spring from Skyhorse Publishing: www.skyhorsepublishing.com. It's a collection of 18 personal essays taking Chiappone from his childhood along the industrial Niagara River in western New York State, to the more than 30 years he's lived in Alaska while fishing some of the greatest trout and salmon rivers in the world, and finally through his late-in-life infatuation with flats fish from Christmas Island to Cuba.

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