



Fishing PLAIN

Long before there were fancy boats, fish finders, modern rods and reels and angling tournaments, most of us were introduced to a simpler way of fishing.

written and photographed by
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Some poetic soul once observed that one of the sweetest sights to a fisherman is “the ripple on the water where the cork was.” Hard to argue with that, and it is also a good bet that most adult anglers’ roots can be traced to that sweet and distant memory of a disappearing cork back when we were no more than 5 or 6 years old. The years may pile up, but the romantic appeal of fishing with cane poles and floats made of cork lingers even after we gravitate to more sophisticated gear and tactics.

Don’t we still remember the smell of red worms on our fingers, and the ritual of digging for them in the rich earth in a barn lot? That old metal minnow bucket hanging in the back of the garage is likely the same one that you played in as a child, dabbling your fingers and watching the minnows dart as you tried to net one. And somewhere in all this clutter is an old rusty wire cricket cage that has not held a chirping cargo in many a year. Tucked up under the eaves, there are probably also a few cane poles, gray and splitting with age, and at least one of them might possibly be wrapped with rotting linen line strung through the first cork float (mine was green and white) that you ever owned. When this stuff was in service, we were lean and tan and there was still hair on our not-so-innocent heads.



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Back then, my family fished mostly on old millponds, or in the black-water rivers of the upper Coastal Plain—the Chowan, Cashie, Wiccacon Creek and others—in

tippy and leaky homemade wooden boats that we rented and bailed with tin cans. The rivers are still there, of course, and so are many of those millponds, although I have not been to some of those ponds in half a century or more. I can see them, though, just as if I had fished them yesterday.

Among them were Jordan’s Pond near Seaboard, Merchant’s Mill (then known as William’s Pond) near Gatesville, Bull Hill

Pond in Northampton County’s Occoneechee Neck and, most especially, Bluegill Pond near Littleton where I caught my first tiny bluegills and crappies while fishing with my grandfather.

And farther east in the mouth of the Little Alligator River, there was a dilapidated cabin built on pilings over the water where my family spent weeks each summer (the last time in the late 1950s). It collapsed a decade later, leaving only a sentinel out-house (also now gone).

Surely, these kinds of places are not greatly different from those you remember, nor are the things they call to mind—bright puffy clouds on a summer day, the light slap of wavelets on the hull, the rasp of red-winged blackbirds, lily pads beaded with droplets and dark, tannic water swarming with water bugs. And it’s likely your brightly colored cork often had a dragonfly perched on top.

My family traveled to these places in an old sedan with the cane poles sticking out a rear window. There were fewer pickup trucks then (even if you really were a farmer), and no vehicles had air-conditioning. The windows were wide open to the buffeting wind and the passing aromas of hog lots, over-worked septic tanks and road kills.

Indeed, smell is such a critical part of memory that, no matter how many years have passed, we could be blindfolded and taken to an old favorite spot and instantly identify it by odor alone—that old musty boathouse, the cabins we stayed in, the faint cedar smell of juniper boats, the pungent cypress swamps that spread wild on every side, even the dank, fishy water itself.

More than half a century later, I still occasionally open my grandfather’s old tackle box just to inhale the mingled aromas of citronella and 6-12 insect repellent overlaid with the essence of 5-cent Muriel Senator cigars. Dad’s tacklebox also carries more than a trace of 6-12, but with an added hint of bird dog (Buck?) from an old collar stored there. And is it my imagination that I detect the faintest whiff of the Mennen after shave lotion he always wore? I think these must be like fine wines, improving with age.

Of course, we cannot separate the physical qualities of these places from the memories of those who agreed (however reluctantly at first) to take us along and, in doing so, gave us a fully immersed baptism into a lifelong obsession. Their faces are like fading photographs pinned prominently to these artifacts — fathers or grandfathers most likely — but others as well, a mother or grandmother wearing a straw hat and sitting in the front of the boat, looking serenely happy and improbably young.

In the late 1950s, North Carolinian Robert Ruark observed in one of his *Field & Stream* columns (later collected in two volumes; “The Old Man and the Boy,” and “The Old Man’s Boy grows Older”) that “fishing is a state of mind.” That sounds about right, except that it’s also very nearly a constant state.

Over time, the mind condenses and edits these pleasant memories, creating a drifting, wistful recollection that may not be literally accurate. As a child, I recall lying in bed hearing the distant early morning drone of a small outboard that passed ever so slowly. Was that at Ft. Landing or on the Chowan? When that

bass broke my first cheap metal rod and ran away with everything but the wooden handle, was I at Bull Hill, some gravel pit or perhaps elsewhere? Where were we when I first saw my grandfather thrash the water with his pole to attract crappies — Cashie, Wiccacon? Did we stop and eat at the Red Apple in Murfreesboro that trip, another or always?

If “nostalgia is the rust of memory,” we eventually reach the age where we are comfortable with the dreamlike patina of whatever remains. Besides, what really matters is so easily reclaimed — open that old tackle box or find that old cork. Better yet, look through the yellowing black-and-white snapshots in the family album. Surely, you will find some dear departed soul fishing on a wonderfully familiar piece of water using nothing fancier than a pole and cork.

I believe I’m going to join them for an hour or so. Maybe you’d like to come along. ⇄

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