

A 'TRUE' North Dakota FISH STORY

By Jim Haverlock

With MS, you always wonder about last times...the last time you ran on the beach, the last time you flew a plane, the last time you fished. Well, it had been about 14 years since I had been fishing, and although my balance isn't good enough to walk without a cane, I was determined to hold a rod and reel in hand again. So about 3:30 pm today, I went down to the Missouri River, just in front of the one bedroom cabin/home I had bought some 14 miles southeast of Williston. The house and lot were bargain priced, and it was here that I was determined to spend my last days--. In any event, with a brand new 6 ft. rod and spinning reel from Wal-Mart and the few lures that came with the combo unit I headed down to the water.

I started and although my casting was a little rusty before long I was depositing the life-like minnow considerable distance into the river, then retrieving it with a flare. Not bad for a man who has to prop himself up with a cane! But no fish! One always hopes for a big strike on the first few casts. Well, Cast out again. Again, no fish. That went on for about ten tries, then my friend took a turn.

With the friend's usual self-assured style, he cast out a considerable distance and, then began the retrieval. He took his share of casting turns (actually more than his share) then handed the rod to me, and I put on my favorite red and white daredevil lure. A few more turns and we tried the squiggly squid, a diving fluorescent bottom feeder... even a green wiggly worm. This went on for approximately two hours, with nary so much as a confirmed strike. We did, however, bring in several broken tree limbs, which we reverently released back into the wild river-- for survival, of course.

It was such a glorious day we didn't mind the lack of fish action. The sky was blue, the sun was shining its warmth down on us and a huge flock of Mallard ducks was "heckling" us. Their incessant chatter made us laugh all afternoon. And we had visitors too. Two men riding their 4-wheel ATV's who were looking for an easy spot to climb up off the beach. It turns out one of them was an old friend, and of course, we had a nice "catch-up" visit after a 15 year hiatus.

About 5:30 pm, my friend decided to head back to the house and get dinner going, allowing me to have full control of the fishing expedition. Thankfully he left the truck so I wouldn't have to walk the couple hundred yards back to the house. I was about finished too, but upon my third and "last" cast of the day, a 'monster' fish attacked my red and white daredevil lure! What a thrill - to feel that tug on the line, the whirl of the line leaving the reel, and the thought of showing off my 'catch' to my friend.

Now you know I haven't any balance with this MS, and cannot stand too long without the use of at least one cane. You can picture me with the cane propped against my body, handle in my lower tummy area, the other end pushed into the soft mud, balancing while casting the line into the river, then reeling in the lure. Except this time there was a considerable weight on the other end, fighting me and my balance. The cane stayed in place, my feet were sucked firmly in the soft mud, and I was gripping the handle of the rod all the while trying desperately to reel in line.

Not surprisingly the fish had other plans, and I was getting nowhere bringing him closer to shore. My reel was set with sufficient tension for bringing in a 3 to 4 pound fish-- this one was pulling line out from the reel with ease! After a couple of minutes, I managed to tighten the tension a 'wee' bit so as not to cause the 8 lb line to break with the battle that was now raging on.

I managed to bring the 'monster' fish in a few feet closer then it took off to

the right --pulling the line out again. And again I brought it in closer, and then it took off to the left, pulling line from the reel with what seemed effortless ease. Although I was getting tired (not just from fighting the fish, but from trying to keep upright), I managed to adjust the tension one more time.

My legs were getting wobbly, my hands and wrists were definitely tiring, but the thought of bringing a really big one home kept me going. Where was my friend when I needed one? Thanks to MS, I couldn't holler anymore, and I knew that I would just have to do this alone--and if I didn't bring this fish in, he'd never believe this story. And all the while the ducks continue their heckling.

After about 20 minutes the fish began to tire, and I began to think of the next big hurdle --how I would get this thing out of the water without losing it, then how I could pick it up and haul it to the house? (Retrieving anything from the floor is only done with great difficulty even when there are things to lean on.) In any event, I was beginning to realize there was more involved here than getting the big strike.

Finally, the fish was almost on shore, when the rod, which was bent almost double under the weight and pressure of this monster, snapped and broke off! Now the fish really had an advantage over me. Great! I let go of the spinning handle, grabbed my cane and using the tip, managed to maneuver the fish ashore. That's when the line broke causing me to almost lose my balance. Again, I dragged the fish further on shore with my cane. Then using the cane to balance myself, I slowly bent over and stuck my fingers in the gill and lifted it up. But it wasn't through fighting and, it flipped in mid-air and fell back to the ground attempting a return to the water. Balancing with the cane, I grabbed the fish again, with fingers securely in the gill and somehow managed to get it up into the back of the pickup truck. My friend would believe me for sure now. 'Proof 'was in my hand.

His eyes lit up as he headed out toward the truck and got his first glimpse of this monster fish. "Holy cow, its huge", he exclaimed with excitement. We both looked that fish over thoroughly, admiring its size and fortitude. It was a huge carp--about 12-14 pounds, and although exhausted from its well fought battle with me (I was pooped, too!) It was still very much alive, even if on dry land.

Supper was already ready on the stove, and the fish was huge. It seemed a shame to kill him, so we decided to give him another chance. He was still hanging on to life when we placed him in the water and watched a slow recovery with gulping motions of his mouth. When we were sure he was going to make it, we eased him out into the deeper water, and we watched it disappear into the depths. Despite the egg rolls and green salad we had for dinner that night, our spirits were warmed by the one that didn't get away. And I had the thrill of a lifetime, knowing that there might still be a few more catches in store for me.