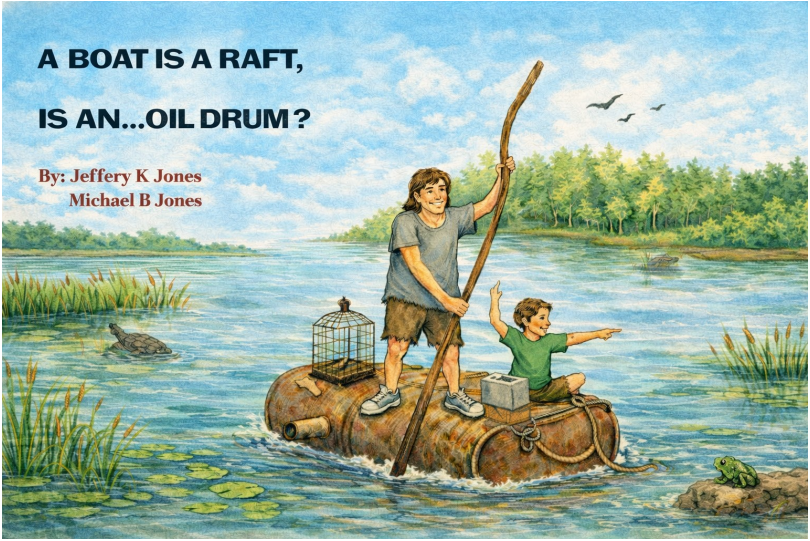


A BOAT IS A RAFT, IS AN...OIL DRUM?

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3 A BOAT IS A RAFT, IS AN... OIL DRUM?

In the summer of 2007 during a family vacation in Michigan, my brother Mike and I drove by one of our former homes. We had always talked about taking a trip down memory lane, and this was our first opportunity to do so. As we walked to the top of the berm behind the old house, the memories flooded back...

It was the summer of 1972, I was 14 and my brother Mike was 9. My family lived in a small rented duplex on White Lake Road in Clarkston, Michigan. White Lake Road was a narrow gravel road that snaked its way over and around the small hills that surrounded the many other lakes along the same road before actually getting to White Lake. We lived in front of an unnamed lake sandwiched between Crosby Lake and Robinson Lake. The area is much the same today, although the lake is smaller and there has been extensive residential development since then. Stating that the house

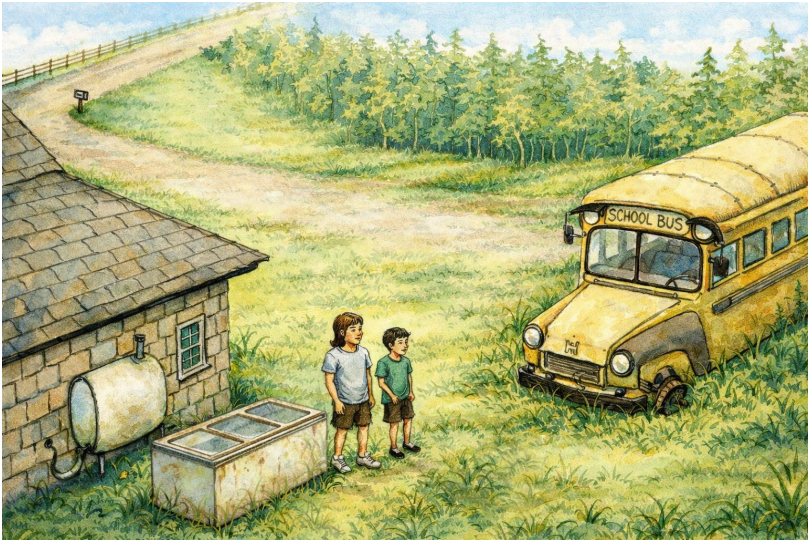
was small is quite an understatement. It was even smaller than my memory had lead me to believe. A grown man can stand at the back door, the one that we used all the time, and look straight onto the shed type roof that covers the kitchen, and he would have to duck and step down to enter.

While we lived there, all of the interior walls with the exception of the demising wall between the two sides were covered with pressboard instead of the traditional drywall or plaster. The galley kitchen was cramped and could not accommodate all of us eating at the same time. The two small bedrooms that six of us siblings shared were accessed by the narrow staircase in the center of the house. When we moved into the house the lingering odor of kerosene and soot that emanated from the pot-bellied stove that sat in the living room was invasive throughout the whole place. You can believe that mom made sure the house received a good “scrubbing” on move-in day!

The house resembled a deluxe “ice shanty” more than it did a home. Even though our last house had been large, six bedrooms with all the fixin’s, our family adjusted easily to our new “digs.” To borrow an expression from my brother Mike, this was not the first time that we had gone from “Champ to Chump.” However, what the interior lacked was more than made up for by the immense exterior surroundings that became our playground.

The house itself sat on a relatively small lot that backed up to a tall berm. There was a well worn, though overgrown path that wound its way to the top. Once at the top, one had a full view of the somewhat horseshoe shaped lake that sat a full sixty feet below. The lake side of the berm was much steeper than the house side and seemed to be an almost shear drop.

The path continued along the length of the berm and gradually flattened out when it reached the reeds and cattails of the soggy marsh that served as the backwater to this medium-sized lake.



THE BACKYARD

In our backyard, directly behind and perpendicular to the house sat an old school bus. Its yellow paint and school markings faded by father time. Not as large as the buses of the day but larger than a mini-bus. It was an old “International” I think, late forties or early fifties vintage. Most of the seats had long since lost their coverings and the weeds had exploited every crack in the steel floorboard to create quite a formidable jungle inside. The windows and the swing-arm door still worked perfectly though! I spent many hours pretending to drive that old bus, picking up many passengers along the way. Mike was the most regular. He and I hung out together all the time.

Also in the backyard in the same general vicinity as the bus, was an old abandoned horizontal ice cream freezer. The well-worn “Borden” stickers affixed to the sides barely legible. It was a big commercial style with eight back-to-back doors in the top, four on each side. This stainless steel prize served equally well as both “tank” and “submarine”, depending upon the imaginary situation of course.

However, our greatest find was attached to the back of the house. Sitting there on its bent, rusting legs was the treasure Mike and I had been seeking. A 275-gallon basement type oil drum! You see, we knew that our family could ill afford to acquire a boat, canoe or any other type of floatation device that we could use to explore the lake and we had been searching for a suitable substitute. We also knew that if our family followed our normal pattern, we wouldn’t be living there when the cold winds started to blow and the drum might be needed again. In fact, the oil drum seemed useless to us in its current configuration. But with a little imagination, and some inventive tinkering, it would make a fine raft. Everyone knows that a raft isn’t much good if it’s not in the water though, and there lie our first challenge. How to get it from its current location up and over the berm so that we could give it a proper launching ceremony at the waters edge?

After a brief strategy session, we determined that because of the large flat sides and the basic oval shape inherent in this style of oil drum it would easily roll anywhere that we wanted it to. After a few minutes with our makeshift tools, our raft was in perfect position to begin the big move. We had drawn an imaginary line across the yard directly to the center of the upward path. Mike and I were confident that once we got it rolling, the oil drum would surely have enough momentum to

help us carry it straight to the top of the berm! Ah for the plans of Mice and Men, and boys and oil drums...my goodness! Our idea had worked about as well as brushing a coat of paint on an ice cube. Not too good.

What we had failed to consider during our strategy session was the possibility that the oil drum might actually contain some oil. The 12-inch filler tube was never discussed either. Well both of these un-thought of conditions made our oil drum much harder to roll than we had imagined it would be. We would roll it one way, then the other and just when it seemed that we were making progress...THUD! That darned ole filler tube! After trying this approach several times, making little headway, we came to a conclusion....we needed a better plan.

Our better plan consisted of me in essence, becoming a mule. Using a crude harness that we had made from reclaimed clothesline, I pulled from the front while Mike pushed for all he could from the back. I still don't see how Mike could have been doing much pushing while yelling "yah mule!" every few seconds. Although that part of Michigan certainly is no Mohave Desert, it isn't Antarctica either...man was it hot. One or two attempts at this convinced us that it was time for Plan C. Our new problem was that we didn't have a Plan C. We had already invested a great deal of time and energy trying to launch our raft and neither of us was willing to quit. Besides, we didn't think mom would have appreciated us abandoning the oil drum in the middle of the yard.

Mom hadn't exactly been taken with the idea that two of her sons wanted to push their way around the lake on a raft... "An oil drum for Gods sake!" She recognized the obvious dangers associated with such an activity and emphatically shared her concerns with us. Nevertheless, mom was also the product of

a different time. When she was a child, kids relied more on their imaginations and less on toys to amuse themselves. Considering that toys in her family had been in short supply, it was a necessity. I think that she was cautiously proud of us though because we were using our imaginations to full effect. Mike and I had begged and pleaded with her long enough to convince ourselves that she had succumbed to the idea....kind of.

Having hit a temporary impasse on how to move our oil drum, we thought that it was a good time for some Kool-Aid and a bologna sandwich. It's funny how a little food and a cool drink can reinvigorate a young mind. Of course mom's last words to us on the subject which came during lunch..."Get that oil drum out of the yard!" helped too. Coming up with Plan C was imperative...what to do? We didn't know just then, but we did know that it couldn't be long before Plan C had to go into full operation.

Back at our oil drum, a few minutes of quiet contemplation and the somewhat distant whine of a neighbor boy's dirt bike sowed the seeds of Plan C. This lanky boy of about 11 or 12 years-old whose hero evidentially was "Evil Knievel" was always bragging about how his Harley 50cc was the best bike in the world! He could do anything with it! We didn't like this boy much because he was a show-off. Not liking someone though is not reason enough to be un-neighborly. With all the interest and congenitally one would expect of a good neighbor, and the schemes of two desperate boys running through our minds, we hiked over toward the pea-gravel hill he was attempting to climb.

After engaging in light conversation for a minute or two, as I knew it would, the bragging began. Having recently heard mom read "Tom Sawyer" on our weekly family reading night,

I think that Mike and I concluded at about the same time that this could be an opportunity to replicate the infamous fence “White-Washing” scenario. It wasn’t as hard as I had thought it would be to challenge him to pull our oil drum to the top of the berm. In fact, I bet him my slightly used target bow and arrow set that he couldn’t do it. I forgot to tell him that I had already lost all of the arrows “somewhere over the berm.” He leapt at the challenge and quickly followed us to where our future raft lay in wait.

Using the same reclaimed clothesline that I had only recently shed, Mike and I fashioned a towing harness for his bike attaching it to the rear shocks of “The little bike that could.” Emulating his hero as best he could, our neighbor boy mustered his courage and let it fly! His first attempt failed miserably! He too had failed to consider that the oil drum might be heavier than anticipated. Upon picking himself up and dusting off, he was ready to quit. I don’t think that the fact Mike and I were laughing our heads off helped much either. It took some quick apologies, a sweetened bet and an offer to push while he pulled to convince him to try again.

We took our positions at the rear of the drum while he revved up. This time he let his clutch out more gradually than before. With him crouched low over the handle bars, the throttle wide open, Mike and I pushing as hard as we could while also spitting away the dirt that was flying all around our heads...She started to move! “GO! GO!” we yelled. Straining with all that we had the three of us pushed, pulled and dragged that old oil drum until at last we reached the summit. Drained from the effort we all three collapsed to the ground and lay in the shadow of the long side of the drum. The earth was cool and the life-giving oxygen sweet. Mike and I were jubilant! Plan C had worked! Or had it?



TOPPING THE SUMMIT

Another funny thing about operations and such is that they usually have at least two parts. We had not yet considered the second part. How in the world do we now get it down to the water? First, we had to get rid of “Evil Knieval.” Don’t get me wrong. It’s not like we weren’t appreciative of his effort, we were, but this was our operation and from this point on he would merely be an unwanted distraction. Besides, he had just won a bow and arrow set, not to mention a blonde and bearded GI JOE! While Mike and I consulted with each other on how best to proceed, he checked his “Hog” for damage. When he rejoined us back at the drum, I told him that we needed to check some things out and didn’t plan to launch until morning. I had lied. We had every intention of seeing our raft afloat that very day. Although clearly disappointed, he accepted my explanation and rode away. Watching him go, somehow I couldn’t help

thinking that there went a Pawn, who had just been bested by a Knight and a King.

We huddled there in our fourth strategy session of the day. It seemed clear that the only requirements would be minor directional re-positioning and a good hearty shove...gravity would do the rest. Our calculations had indicated that the oil drum would easily slide down the hill. The large flat side would act somewhat like a snowplow in winter building an ever-growing mound of dirt in front of it thus slowing its descent. We envisioned it slipping gracefully into the glass-like water of the narrow channel that separated the lakes two sides. Ah for the plans of Mice and Men.... This part of the plan worked about as well as Plan A had. Not too good.



OUR DRUM IS AIRBORNE!

The re-positioning went well, as did the shove. As for the sliding part... that darned ole filler tube! The first 10 – 12 feet

went just as planned, but then the unexpected happened. Our best guess is that the perhaps 15 gallons of kerosene still in the drum shifted to the front. The increased weight caused the now rapidly descending monster to become off balance. She started to deviate in her downward trajectory with an increasing side-to-side motion. The filler tube dug into the ground cutting a deep trough eventually catching on a protruding tree root. Snagging the root caused the drum to spin wildly end over end with a stop-stutter type movement reminiscent of a wobble ball. Our raft was now airborne! Arcing away from the now irrelevant berm its silvery sides glistening in the late afternoon sun, our old oil drum did an almost perfect 2-½ flip and landed in the water with a loud “THWANG”... right where we had planned! The momentum of the event carried her well out into the channel where she bobbed playfully, inviting us to join her. So much for our launching ceremony!

Although we had not yet thought about our propulsion system we gleefully swam the thirty yards and attempted to board her for the first time. This was not as easy as it might sound. It proved to be very difficult to get a grip on the rounded and oil slicked sides. Each time that we would claw our way about halfway up either side, oil and gravity would take over sliding us back into the water. After learning to use the once foreboding filler tube as a foothold, it actually became quite simple to board. And so our dreamed about maiden voyage consisted of laying there on our bellies, using our hands as paddles nursing what was now our raft into shallower waters to moor her for the night.

The following morning Mike and I were up earlier than usual. The anticipation of what was to be our first full day on the raft had made for a restless night. Fitful sleeplessness had

plagued us all night long. Most of the night was consumed with excited conversation about the great expeditions we would mount from our secret base. The first bent ray of sunshine that penetrated through our ruffled bedroom curtain vanquished all that...we were ready to sail!

We dispatched our morning chores in record time and then quietly stepped through our little kitchen door and into destiny.

We seemed to be the only humans awake that early in the morning. The only sounds that we heard on the way to the raft were the songs of the early birds and the annoying cawing from some busybody crows. We proceeded through the cattails and green snake-grass to the spot where we had moored our vessel the night before.

Mike had received a hatchet for a birthday gift several months earlier, which now seemed priceless. He busied himself with the cutting of a long narrow sapling, one that could be fashioned into a perfect pushing pole. With that task complete, it was time to board our raft and sail into history!

Poling our way through the shallow marshes proved to be the ideal “shakedown” cruise for our new craft. Doing so allowed us to gather all of the pertinent information we would need in order to navigate the raft on future missions. For example, we discovered that when both of us stood upright and didn’t move in perfect unison, the old oil drum would buck us off like a wily old rodeo bull sluffs off a novice cowboy. Again and again, we tweaked our technique until it became conclusive that the best way to control the raft was simply by one of us staying low and the other upright poling. Even then

it took a certain measure of concentration to stay dry. So it was that this steel Angus was to be tamed, not broken. An hours worth of practice with a few more dunking's in the marsh brought us complete control of the stubborn old drum. Enough so that we could now proclaim ourselves "Master and Commander" of the ship! We had but one solemn duty to perform before we could depart on our first voyage of discovery... christen the ship.

What had started as a cool and slightly misty dawn was now transformed into a warm hazy morning. The still backwater of the marsh came alive. The resident snakes, frogs and turtles each searching for their respective breakfasts. A loggerhead turtle slid from his perch atop a warm grassy mound, disturbed by the bending cattails created as the silver hull of the "S/S TEXACO" emerged from its sheltered harbor and into the tranquil waters of our unnamed sea.

Mike and I had walked the entire shoreline of the lake several times and thought that we knew it pretty well. Seeing it from our new perspective, somehow the entire lake seemed larger than before. The beaches and craggy inlets on the opposite side more distant. As we cleared the south channel and set our course north by northwest, the first sheer cliffs and rocky overhangs of "Monkey Island" came into view. The island sat at the far end of the horseshoe and was the most prominent feature of the lake. It was the most treasured playground that any boy who loved outdoor adventures ever had. We were looking forward to coming ashore in a manner in which we were unaccustomed. First, we had to get there.

Before we acquired our sea-borne mode of transportation, we had usually hiked our way around the lake to the closest

point of land before swimming out to the island. The entire trip took about 15 – 20 minutes.



MONKEY ISLAND

As we took our line-of-sight course toward the now mysterious island, the water became deeper and deeper. The still fresh sapling that served as our only method of propulsion was less effective than it had been in the marsh. Soaking up a lot of water and getting heavier it seemed to be growing shorter as well. I had perfected my poling technique using an upright position and was confident in my abilities. However, I now found myself crouching low just to maintain a grip on the slippery pole. Soon all headway was lost. Our vessel was becalmed just as surely as if we had entered the dreaded equatorial doldrums. Once again we found ourselves using our hands as paddles making for the nearest shore so that we could regain control of our beleaguered craft.

Laying face down looking into depths that we had not previously seen opened the door to a world of discoveries. The inverted hull of a canoe lying in twenty feet of water reawakened recently read stories about the perils of stormy seas. Further along, a discarded swim mask and flippers made one wonder if the two were somehow connected? The depth and clarity of the water was astounding.

Having regained control of our sturdy little raft, we were consigned to keep close to shore else we find ourselves in similar circumstances yet again. The expression of being “Up the creek without a paddle” certainly had more meaning now than it ever had before. As with most of life’s rich experiences, this one too served as “Food for Thought.”

Upon returning to our concealed cove that afternoon we were again greeted by our loggerhead friend. This time he maintained his perch. He no longer seemed intimidated by his strange new neighbors. He went about his routine as if we weren’t even there. This turtle ruled his domain with some authority and the other aquatic life in the marsh gave him plenty of leeway. I found it amazing that he could have grown to such large proportions with that being so. Apparently he was a good hunter despite his large size.

We watched him for several hours. He was a strong swimmer, as you can imagine a turtle must be. Many times we saw him bull his way through the dense reeds and seaweed that covered the bottom of the marsh in search of prey. The more that we watched, the more we wondered...could this marine marvel somehow be harnessed to our old oil drum as I had been? There was only one way to find out. Launch Operation Turtle!

Not having any prior experience with the capture of turtle's in the wild so to speak, Mike and I were perplexed. It was obvious that ole "Herc" was a better swimmer than either of us and he sure could dive longer. How do we go about this procedure? You must remember that this was many years before the debut of shows like "The Crocodile Hunter" which demonstrated such capture techniques. In the end, it was plain old common sense that achieved our objective...sort of.



HATCHING OPERATION TURTLE

While Mike drew the turtle's attention, I sneaked up on him from behind and slipped a lasso around his neck. Simple right? Well, not quite. We had forgotten that a turtle, when threatened would withdraw into his shell. That's just what ole Herc did. Of course when he pulled his neck back I was left holding an empty noose. As he did this, he also started to backslide from his throne into the water. It was an impressive evasive maneuver although ultimately

unsuccessful. Reacting to the evolving situation, Mike did the only thing he could have...he dove forward grabbing Herc on either side of his shell and held on for dear life! I couldn't help but laugh as I watched ole Herc pull Mike face first through the shallows heading for the sanctuary of deeper water. The scene looked for all the world like an unchoreographed version of little "Bud" being pulled around by "Flipper!" Realizing that he required my assistance, I jumped forward helping Mike to his feet before this Herculean turtle could drag my little brother into oblivion. To my astonishment, he still had a death hold on ole Herc, and the capture was complete.

There is quite a difference between capturing a turtle and attempting to harness one. Herc was not exactly resigned to the idea of becoming a pet and he didn't much like the harness that we had rigged for him either. He struggled mightily as we fumbled tying the various knots around his tapered shell. With the job finally done, we sat him there on the deck of the raft hoping that he would eventually warm to the idea. He didn't. For the longest time, he stayed motionless refusing to emerge from his shell. I know that patience is a virtue, but it does have its limitations too. When enough became enough we did the only prudent thing that we could. We tossed ole Herc overboard with a loud "SPLOOSH", harness and all.

That did the trick! Ole Herc took off as if he had been shot out of a cannon... straight to the bottom of the marsh where he hid amongst the reeds and cattails. Heaving on the line, we hauled him back onboard. Mike and I were undeterred in our desire to harness Herc as a beast of burden. We got underway and headed for the deeper water of the channel. After shortening his leash, Herc once again was tossed over

the side. With not enough line now to reach the bottom ole Herc reacted just as we had assumed he would. He took up the slack in the line swimming for the marsh with all his strength. Unfortunately, his effort was not sufficient to consider replacing me as our primary propulsion unit.

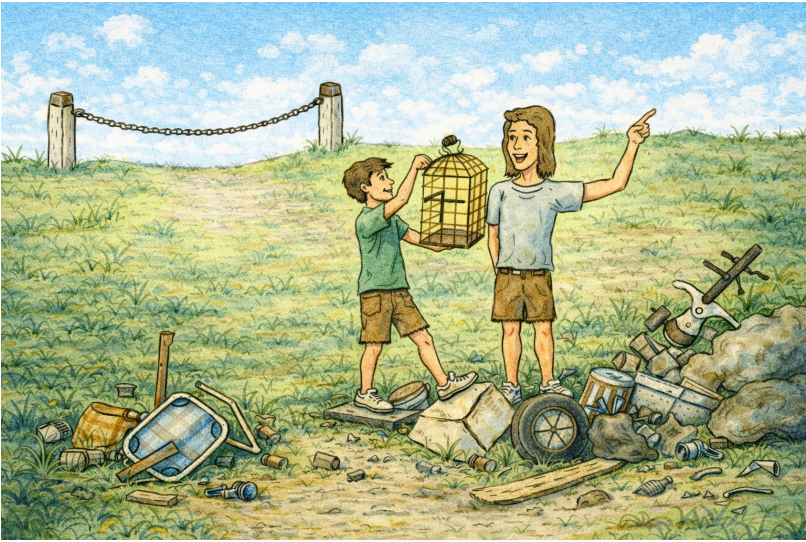
We kept ole Herc around a few more days ultimately releasing him back into his beloved marsh. Ever after when the S/S TEXACO made passage through his domain, ole Herc, the guardian of the marsh, would unceremoniously slip beneath the murky waters. Perhaps remembering the day when two audacious boys had attempted to Yoke him to an unconventional raft...An oil drum for Gods sake!

During the summer of "72" Mike and I spent every waking hour that we could aboard our trusty sloop. We would rise early each morning so as to complete our chores prior to casting off at 0800. Also packing a lunch, leave mom a note...and hope that we weren't called back mid-day for some additional chores. Many times another wonderful high-seas adventure was temporarily postponed by the distant call... "Jeff, Mike...Come home now."

This routine became quite regimented. So much so that we even developed a uniform of sorts. Cut-off blue jean shorts, worn tee shirt and partially laced "Converse" knock-offs. Long pants and socks weren't required in this man's Navy! Stowing our gear strategically on deck, we would shove off from the soggy outcrop that we had renamed "Marsh Harbor", leaving behind our homeport and the hastily built dock of old shipping pallets which jutted from the shore.

Our voyages took us to all the different parts of the lake. North by northwest to "Monkey Island", north by northeast

to “Pea-Gravel Dune” and due north to where our partially buried treasure awaited...The local Dump! This was before the time of the well-established “Convenience Centers” that we are so familiar with today. Most people discarded unwanted household items in a wide spot along some gravel road in the County. This part of White Lake Road was one of those spots. Of course trash was usually burned at home or picked up by the garbage truck. This was a place where you might find an old bicycle that was missing a tire, a defective lawn chair, a slightly cracked Styrofoam cooler or even a perfectly good birdcage. They say that one man's trash is another man's treasure...how so very true!



FINDING THE BIRDCAGE

Finding our birdcage early on a hot August afternoon, Mike and I recognized that we had obtained a valuable new tool to add to our growing collection. We had been using a bamboo pole that we had acquired on a previous excursion for our

fishing expeditions. Due to its long length, it had not been easy to transport and was difficult to bait and cast. We had become so discouraged with the ineffectiveness of our unwieldy fishing pole that we had all but given up on actually catching any fish with it and occasionally used it as a flagpole instead. In our newly found medium-sized birdcage complete with wire handle and vertical sliding door, we saw lots of potential and immediately re-designated it as “Fish Trap One.” As I recall, our first opportunity to use Fish Trap One came only hours after the acquisition of this new fangled wonder.

Nestled deep amongst the cattails, lilies and various other water foliage that was Marsh Harbor provided the perfect strategic location for our clandestine tinkering operations. The wooden pallet peninsula that served as our dock stood at the furthestmost tip of the teardrop shaped marsh. Low grassy dunes to the east and the backside of the berm to the south afforded complete concealment from prying eyes. Often as we worked, one of us would raise up, and like a human periscope scan the area for intruders. Wanting to keep our operation secret until we could perfect our trapping technique, this is where we brought our birdcage to perform the necessary modifications.

First, we straightened a few bent bars and tied a piece of clothesline to the handle. Boy, that old reclaimed clothesline sure came in handy! Next, we removed the trapeze swing that hung from the top. Lastly, we tied a fishing line to the vertical sliding door. Modifications complete, we poled our way down the 40ft wide channel to the open lake.

Making our way to a large protruding rock with a “pot-holed” façade that we had named “Old Crater Face”, we dropped

anchor. It was not a conventional anchor perhaps but effective nonetheless. Half a cinder block fastened securely to...you guessed it...Reclaimed clothesline. Old Crater Face's gnarly head jutted out from the bottom of the berm and cast a large shadow over deep clear water full of large fish. Many times before, we had tried unsuccessfully to snag some of those fish. Now we were confident that we would be having pan-fried fish for supper!

Using the same bait that I had frequently used in mousetraps, I pulled my peanut butter and jelly sandwich from my back pocket. As usual, the wax paper that I had wrapped it in slipped in my hand leaving the bottom of the pocket smeared with grape jelly. Darn, I wish we could afford sandwich bags. We split what was left of the mangled mess into three's. One piece each, and one for bait. That was the easy part. Stringing the bait from the top with fish line, "THREE...TWO...ONE...LAUNCH! Mike slung our trap over the side. We watched as it descended into the depths settling on the bottom in a murky brown cloud. Once the water cleared, we could see that our lure had not survived the descent. Water and bread don't mix well, even if you are using the heel. The breakup of the bait had drawn a lot of attention though, and there were many inquisitive fish hovering nearby. Excitedly retrieving our trap, we wanted to try again with a larger piece of sandwich.

This time I took command of the line. Loosening my grip slowly, I more closely controlled the rate of descent until the cage came to rest gently on a downward slope. Badly broken, our enticement was still semi-intact and already producing the desired effect. I pulled open the door with the attached fishing line. One after the other of the fish swam inside to investigate the swaying temptation, which quickly escalated

into a virtual feeding frenzy. In the exhilaration of the moment Mike and I both ended up on the same side of the raft. Our animated and off balance movements helped that “Wiley Old Rodeo Bull” to strike again. We foundered.

Although we always enjoyed a dip in the lake, that was not our primary objective that afternoon. Scrambling back aboard, we were determined to try yet again. Our impromptu swim had caused all of the previously interested fish in the neighborhood to scatter. We had to sit very still for another fifteen minutes before any of them returned to examine the strange new item sitting in the midst of their realm.



GETTING BUCKED OFF!

Ever so slowly, they started to come back. I wondered if smaller fish served as scouts for the larger fish? I could just hear some big bass telling the minnows “Get out there and check that thing out!” “Wave a fin if the coast is clear.” “Go

on now!” Probably not, but it seemed so. There were so many minnows and bluegills tearing into the bait that I was concerned that there might not be any left if we should happen to draw a larger fish into the area. I need not have worried. As if right on cue, a very nice 12-inch bass emerged from the shadows underneath Old Crater Face.

Like a boxer sizing up his opponent, this wary marauder cautiously circled the unfamiliar object that had drawn his attention. He was very interested in what was left of the bait, but suspicious of it too. I thought that maybe he could smell the scant bit of peanut butter still clinging to the bait line, and the temptation overcame him. He quickly darted into the opening while at the same time taking a bite at the line. I was ready for him. Using cat-like reflexes, timing just perfect, I dropped the door to the cage. The trap was successful! Fish Trap One had earned its name!

Mike and I were ecstatic. “It worked!” “It worked!” we kept telling each other. We danced around on top of the S/S TEXACO hooping and hollering like a couple of dang fools. Mike even let out a loud “Tarzan” yell...I don’t know why Tarzan...but it seemed appropriate at the time. Even though our dancing led to another dunking, it didn’t matter. It was a great moment, one that I will always remember.

Once the excitement of the capture eased, Mike retrieved our catch and rigged him to the twig and fishing line stringer we had attached to the filler tube. Out of bait, we speculated if we should try again nevertheless. We did, we had to.

This time our bait was an old washer that I had in my change pocket. As well as grape jelly, I always had some such trinkets and other nonsense in my pockets. Tying it so that it dangled closer to the top, we again lowered our now prized trap back

into the water. Victory! We had done it again! Time after time, we lowered our trap, and time after time, we came up with a fish. We took turns fishing this way until our little stringer was full. Realizing that we didn't need any edible bait also meant that my fish "having a sense of smell" theory had been proven questionable at best. I still don't know. Oh well, that doesn't matter either.

Mike and I triumphantly hauled our catch home that evening. Grinning from ear to ear, we were beaming as we descended the berm and mom glanced up from where she had been taking in clothes on what was left of her clothesline. We proudly displayed to her what we had caught. Mom was flabbergasted! She was amazed and found it hard to believe that we had actually been able to catch fish with an old birdcage. All through supper that evening, she sang our praises while also piling everyone's plate high...with pan-fried fish.

Over the course of the next couple of weeks, Mike and I brought home so many fish that mom told us to stop. "You're going to grow gills and get all scaly," she said. We still fished, but ever since she made her statement, it was strictly for the sport of it. From that point forward, we would always catch and release.

One Saturday morning near the end of August while Mike and I were preparing to get underway, we heard "busy" type noises coming from the direction of Pea Gravel Dune. Although the sound was not loud at Marsh Harbor, we could tell that there was much activity going on. It seemed a bit early for the non-resident strangers that came for their weekend swim parties. Besides, they normally played on and swam around Monkey Island. This commotion clearly came

from the opposite direction. The light breeze carried faint voices, the crunching of tires on gravel, various other “clanking” and “clunking” sounds...something else too. “Was that the sound of an outboard motor?” I thought. “Yes, I think it was.” In all the time we had been plying the lake, we had not once seen or heard an outboard boat. An occasional rowboat, but never any powerboats. There was more than one too. Within a few minutes, the air was heavy with the low growl of at least a half-a-dozen. Wow! What is going on? We asked each other. There was only one way to find out. Launch Operation Recon!

We hastily made way for the channel and the open lake beyond. Poling is a slow process however, and before we could reach the South Channel, the several boats had gone in different directions. Just as we cleared the marsh and entered the channel, a 14ft Jon boat powered by a 25hp Johnson came blazing straight for us! Not being particularly familiar with the official “Rules of the Road”, and not caring at that moment, we did the only logical thing we could have...we jumped!

The two guys in the boat were just as startled as we were. Neither one of them jumped, but they both yelled loudly. I cannot repeat exactly what it was they yelled; let’s just say it was some sort of expletive...or two. The man driving turned hard starboard while also throttling down. This action sent a large surge of water toward our abandoned raft. Similar to a tsunami clearing a shore, this wave set our deck awash and sent everything over the side.

Once back onboard and everything back in its place, the men approached us slowly. “What in the heck is that thing?” One of them asked. “It looks like an oil drum,” said the other.

“Yeah, that’s what it is,” I said. “Are you boy’s crazy?” “Do you really use that thing for a raft?” “Sure,” I answered. “Why not?” “You guys could get killed like that,” the driver said. Having made his point, he applied full throttle and sped away in the direction of Monkey Island before we could enquire as to their activities on the lake.

Setting our course north by northeast, we slowly poled our way toward the small inlet that sat in front of Pea Gravel Dune. We had spotted a small wooden boat with a single occupant that we hoped would be friendlier. He was.

Drifting up to him from the leeward side, we anchored off his port bow. He told us that they were all members of a small sport-fishing club and that they held a tournament on this lake the same weekend every year. He too was curious about our rig, though in a nicer way than the first two men had been. He laughed a little but complimented us on our ability to improvise. Mike and I both liked this guy. We told him how we lived on the lake, and about our recent success using Fish Trap One. He seemed taken aback, somewhat puzzled by our tale. Assuring him that we were telling the truth, we offered to show him our secret spot below Old Crater Face. He said that he had never won the tournament anyway, had nothing to loose, and so agreed. He even offered us a ride in his small boat and a tow for the S/S TEXACO. We eagerly accepted.

We quickly rigged our raft for towing. Suggestive of a tugboat hauling a barge, his small outboard handily pulled the drum in the direction Mike had pointed. Making the trip under power versus poling, the trip took only a few minutes instead of the usual twenty or so. Mike guided him to the shadowed area

with the clear deep water, where we dropped anchor on both vessels.

Our new friend reached into his generously stocked tackle box and retrieved a shiny new lure. We on the other hand gently lowered Fish Trap One into position. Before he could finish rigging his line and cast, Mike was already recovering our trap, complete with a nice 10-inch bass. Man was he surprised! He had been so preoccupied with preparing his line that he had failed to observe our unique fishing technique. With a look of bewilderment visible in his eyes, he asked if we could repeat our routine. “We can use this method to catch fish all day” I boasted. “Show me,” he said.

With the challenge having been issued, I sent our reliable old trap into the abyss yet again. Our “Buddy” watched closely as the cage settled on the bottom. Resembling schoolchildren being let out on recess, a variety of fish swarmed the basket. Buddy looked on in astonished silence. Wanting to show off now, I kept the trap door down until an appropriately sized fish came into view. One hand gently rocked the cage back and forth so that the bright washer sent shimmers of light in every direction. With the other hand, I opened and closed the door in a teasing fashion each time this larger fish approached. Never before had either of us tried to use any additional movement to attract our prey. We should have.

Anyone who has fished on a regular basis knows that every lake, stream or pond has its resident “Granddaddy” fish. So it was on our lake too. It might be a big Trout, Pike or Catfish that never seemed to get caught, but on this body of water, it was a very large Bass. Mike and I thought that we had seen him, though infrequently.

As I continued the mesmerizing actions, the long, dark silhouette of this deep-water predator emerged from somewhere below the craggy overhang. Looking like a submarine, his bulk and beam were impressive. The other fish that had been scrutinizing our trap suddenly seemed more interested in their respective well-being than they were in the shiny washer. Without exception, they darted clear of this aquatic fiend, leaving him alone to survey what he will. Our buddy exclaimed excitedly “Look at that Guy!” “That’s gotta be the Granddaddy!” “Easy now boys, don’t lose him!”



SIZING UP THE BAIT

Eager with anticipation, I deliberately pulled open the door to the cage. Seemingly in a hypnotic trance, this big fish eased slowly toward the bait. Poking his head partially inside caused his sides to rub against the side of the door. This startled him and caused a momentary retreat. Perhaps wanting to save face with the assembled audience, maybe

just wanting what he thought must be something special, he returned to the scene. Cautiously, he evaluated the situation. It was obvious that he wanted the dangling object that had so enticed him, but he was distrustful too. He was not accustomed to being touched and was careful to approach the still open door of the cage. Suddenly with a powerful thrust from his tail, he torpedoed toward the opening. I don't know if this caused him to slim down, or if he just generated enough forward momentum, but he darted through the trap door and swallowed the washer whole!

"Whoopee!" "Yahoo!" That was our buddy this time. "You got him!" he hollered. "Bring him up fella's" "Let's have a look!" he said.

Mike started reeling in the phenomenal trap. As it broke water, the thrashing of the big beast started the cage rocking to and fro, so that it looked like a bell swinging in a tower. It was much heavier than it ever had been, and he struggled getting it to the deck.

Drawn by the uproar of their fishing partner, other boats soon arrived to probe the cause of the disturbance. Almost immediately, the little cove was crammed with a dozen men on several different boats. None of them could believe what our new best buddy was describing as a remarkable fishing performance. Some of them scoffed at our little raft, and proclaimed some sort of hoax. Others looked on in stunned disbelief. The proof was there in front of them, still thrashing about in the cage...could it really be? It was. After much hullabaloo, the other men in the club reluctantly acknowledged that we had indeed caught the biggest fish that any of them had ever seen in the ten years that they had been fishing this lake. Many of them grumbled that it just

wasn't right that a couple of boys could steal away what they perceived as their rightful prize. Although most of the men grudgingly offered their congratulations and went about their way, our friend dutifully acclaimed our catch as a great accomplishment.

Once the other boats had left the area and proceeded back to whence they came, Buddy stated that he was going to continue fishing Old Crater Face. "Maybe ole Granddaddy has a brother hiding somewhere down there," he said. "I'm sure going to try and flush him out if he does." Having said that, he went about attaching his lure and preparing for a cast in that direction.

Mike and I pondered the circumstance in which we now found ourselves. We had obviously stolen the thunder of everyone in the club. Even though we had the largest catch, we were not members of their club and therefore could not receive whatever prize had been offered. Our new friend on the other hand was a member, and as he had been so nice to us, we wanted him to win. Upon talking it over, we decided to present our catch to him.

Easing our way over to his little outboard, I pulled the Granddaddy from Fish Trap One and offered him up. Buddy seemed genuinely surprised by our generosity. Mike and I each expressed to him our thanks and appreciation as the reason for our gift. He considered the proffer and almost accepted...almost. "Thanks fella's, but I can't," he said after a lengthy pause. "It's awfully nice of you, but winners never cheat...and cheaters never win." "You caught him, he's rightfully yours." The finality of his statement ended the conversation.

Feeling somewhat forlorn over the rejection of our offer, we weighed anchor and got underway for homeport. During the passage, we considered how we might yet help this true “Sportsman” to win. There was only one way. We had to release this creature back into the depths from which he had come and hope that Buddy would get lucky enough to snare him with his shiny new lure.



MAKING AN OFFER

Nearing the far side of the little cove that had recently bustled with so much activity, the water now was calm. Glancing back at our friend, he gave us a wave. I held the cage high over my head so that he could see. With his attention drawn, I handed Fish Trap One to Mike. As our friend watched, Mike slid open the door to the cage and nobly returned the magnificent bass back into his dominion. Standing there with eyes locked, I knew that Buddy

understood the significance of our gesture and that a bond of camaraderie had been shared. “Good luck friend,” I thought.

We turned again for home, leaving behind in our slight rainbow wake, a grand old bass and a modest new acquaintance. I gained something from that experience too, a moral lesson that has lasted a lifetime... “Winners never cheat...and Cheaters never win.”

We spent the remainder of that summer much as we had the beginning. Poling our way here and there, trapping fish and of course, swimming. As always was the case though, the inevitable happened. We were going to move. This proved once again that all good things must end.

One evening, during a not unusual supper of canned “Chow Mien” and crappy noodles, mom quieted all of us kids in preparation of “The Talk.” We had heard it before, at least a dozen times I’ll bet, but as I got older, I was expected to better understand the gravity of the family situation. I couldn’t help but think that many of her remarks were directed at me. Finances were as tight as they ever had been. However, there was a way that we could improve our lot. In a “Matter-of-Fact” tone that left no room for debate, mom explained the where, when and how of our next destination in life. We all knew that mom lead a tough life, she tried as hard as she could, and we were along for the ride, no matter what. Our new home was to be an apartment in the nearby village of Lake Orion.

My Aunt Martie had been living there for the past year and had fulfilled her lease obligation. She had the opportunity to take a different apartment that was much closer to where she worked. This would make her current apartment available to mom. The rent was less than what we were

paying now, and my aunt had already paved the way for our occupation. "Oh by the way," mom said, "we're moving this weekend." Just like that, the bare-naked truth lay before us. We were moving again...and soon.

The move was planned for Saturday, so that all of the school-aged kids could start in their new schools on the first day of the new school year the following Monday. Moreover, it was the beginning of a new month, the normal rent cycle. As we would be busy packing, Mike and I had but one more day to enjoy our raft. This was going to be the hardest move yet.

Not wanting to waste a minute of the precious few remaining to us, we were up much earlier than usual the following morning. As we made our way to Marsh Harbor, the first light of day cracked the Eastern horizon. We watched the Sun light the morning sky with brilliant streaks of bright yellow and blazing red.

As we pushed off from our dependable old dock, Mike and I had decided to make a circular course around the lake moving in a counterclockwise direction. This would take us through the South Channel, past Pea Gravel Dune, the Treasure Trove, around Old Crater Face, onward to Monkey Island and returning over the sunken wreckage of the canoe in the deepest part of our lake. Poling the entire lake in this way would take all day, and would also ensure us a view of every cherished location in our soon former kingdom.

We made our way slowly around the shoals, not in any particular hurry. As we did, we discussed the future of the S/S TEXACO. Should we sink her somewhere in the depths, send her to a dignified end? Or set her adrift to find her own way? One thing was for sure, we couldn't take her with us.

The further along we went, the more it came to us; perhaps like the stories of Mark Twain, this one need not end. The adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn flowed together so well that one could imagine the two boys still romping away in some distant playground, not unlike our own. It was decided. Mike and I would leave the S/S TEXACO and all of her gear coupled to the dock that had become her home. Possibly, in some subsequent summer, other boys would happen upon her. Maybe she would still be bobbing playfully, inviting them...come join me!



FINAL VOYAGE

As we headed home and topped the berm, we turned to study our province for the last time. The fading Sun backlit the scenery in a warm glow, burning the image into our hearts and minds. Ole Herc returned to his warm, grassy mound, perhaps never again having to duck away from our

old oil drum as she plowed her way through the swampy marsh. “Did you see that?” Mike asked. “It looked like Ole Herc was waving goodbye!” “No he wasn’t,” I said. “It was just your imagination”...

Standing back on that berm, some 35-years later, Mike and I once again surveyed what had been our empire. I am near the half-century mark now, Mike just a few years behind. I see the gray that permeates his hair, as I am sure he sees mine. We are older, but the adventure of our youth rushes back headlong. The berm is much smaller than it had been, and the lake almost nonexistent. But when I look over, I still see a nine year-old boy, thrilled by he and his brother’s explorations during that fantastic summer so long ago when A Boat was a Raft, was an... Oil Drum!