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Fishing

by

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When the call came from the Texas Folklore Society for papers about hunting and fishing lore, I immediately dismissed it. I never hunted and haven't fished in years. Yet, the more I thought about it, the more I realized what an important hand fishing took in developing my attitude toward life and people.

In those pre-feminist days during the late fifties and early sixties, women with children rarely worked outside the home. I was the middle child of three girls, tow-headed, with wide and trusting eyes. To keep from driving our mother crazy, she kept us busy playing with dolls in the winter, carving doll houses out of cardboard boxes and decorating them with scraps of wallpaper and fabric. In the summer, we were expected to play outdoors. Our only enemies then were snakes and the sticker-burs that infested the deep sandy soil where we lived. My older sister, with her delicate hands and tiny wrists, had an almost abnormal fear of spiders. Although she never grew to love the outdoors as much as I did, she put aside her trepidations, and we spent many hours gathering overgrown vegetables from the garden, placing them in old pots on a bench and pretending to cook as we added water from the garden hose.

We lived in a hundred-year-old house on fifteen acres two miles outside a small town. Our father was a workaholic who liked to labor alone, so we didn't often accompany him when he checked on his cattle on other acreage he owned. He had strict ideas about what was proper for girls to do, but he allowed us to roam the land our house sat on. His only warning was that we were to stay away from the fence of our neighbors, carefully explaining they had an old, mentally challenged son who wouldn't hurt us, but he did

not want us to bother him. Forty years later I learned another reason he did not want us close to the fence—the neighbor's son had developed a fondness for cows our father did not want us to witness.

In the heat of the summer, however, we forgot our fear of snakes and spiders and with friends swam in our tank—what everyone outside of Texas calls a pond. The water was muddy and the color of an anemic orange. We scared the snakes away with our noise, but the fish often nibbled at our toes. When friends weren't around, I would walk the two miles into town to my grandparents' tiny house, the remnant of an old hotel. Sometimes my grandfather would take me fishing with him, something I enjoyed immensely because it let me spend time with him. I liked to talk too much occasionally, as most children do, and Grandpa would tell me we had to be perfectly quiet when we fished because we didn't want to scare the fish away. Years later when my husband took me fishing, he asked why I was so silent. I looked at him in surprise. Didn't this city boy I married know anything? When I repeated Grandpa's edict, he burst into laughter, explaining we didn't have to be *that* quiet. Poor Grandpa! He must have been desperate trying to shut up his little chatterbox of a granddaughter.



Left - Me at a later age on Grandpa's truck.

Behind my grandparents' house resided a family with many children. They were "townies," and had a much more *laissez faire* attitude about life than I was used to. One of the girls my age often came to play with me when she saw I was in town, and sometimes we would imitate television shows. Rusty had round, slightly bulging eyes and brilliant, even, white teeth. A stout girl, she would jump behind the steering wheel in my grandfather's old truck and play *Green Hornet*. She always wanted to be Kato because he got to drive. I sat on the other side and tried to pretend I was the Green

Hornet, but I never could get the hang of it. Other times, she would suggest we play *Gomer Pyle*. She would be Sergeant Carter and yell and order me around, while I grinned sheepishly like Gomer and looked dumb. I was better at being Gomer Pyle than the Green Hornet.

One day, to my relief, she suggested instead we walk to a small tank on some land my grandfather leased down the road. We stomped through wispy grass and weeds in those happy, carefree days before fire-ants, and once at the tank saw an unusual sight. Dozens of small fish were jumping in and out of the water, swimming and leaping from one end of the tank to the other. They leapt in time like marching soldiers, in and out of the water until they reached the other side. In one coordinated swift move, they turned and swam back, jumping in and out of the water to the other end of the tank, repeating it over and over again.

Rusty and I turned to one another wide-eyed and opened-mouthed. "Let's try to catch some!" she said, and I eagerly agreed. We looked around until we found an old fishing net my sometimes careless grandfather had left behind. It would be easy, we thought; all we would have to do would be stand at the edge of the water, and the fish would just jump into our net.

It didn't turn out that way. Laughing, talking, we took turns grabbing for the fish with our net. All the din and ruckus we made did not deter the fish from their fantastic hurdling through the air and swimming from one end of the tank to the other. Nor did they allow themselves to be caught in the net. Rusty and I spent hours trying to catch those fish, a seemingly easy task that turned out to be impossible. Finally, exhausted, we gave up and went back home.

To our chagrin, no one believed our story about the jumping fish. Repeatedly, we tried to describe what we saw and were met with disbelief. We finally gave up trying to get anyone to believe us. Years later when I attempted to explain it to my then husband, he agreed the fish were probably mullets, but reserved judgment on the leaping part of my account.

Rusty and I took different paths in life and drifted apart. She's gone now, and can no longer back up my story. When someone repeats a questionable tale, I remember Grandpa's subterfuge and realize even the people we love don't always tell the exact truth. And yet, there were those mullets....

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