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FINDING HART: THE LOST TEXT AND BIOGRAPHY OF HART STILWELL

A Thesis

by

BRANDON D. SHULER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas - Pan-American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2009

Major Subject: Literature

FINDING HART: THE LOST TEXT AND BIOGRAPHY OF HART STILWELL

A Thesis
by
BRANDON D. SHULER

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December 2009

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ABSTRACT

Shuler, Brandon D., Finding Hart: The Lost Text and Biography of Hart Stilwell. Master of Art (MA), December 2009, 265 pp., references, 72 titles.

Hart Stilwell was a noted newspaperman, journalist, outdoor writer, and political activist. He is most noted for the books *Border City* (1945), *Uncovered Wagon* (1947), and *Campus Town* (1950), which were, as confessed to J. Frank Dobie, Stilwell's life story. *Finding Hart: The Lost Text and Biography of Hart Stilwell* pieces together the most inclusive biographical sketch of this enigmatic man of Texas letters to date through his correspondences and autobiographical novels.

The author has also included an edited and footnoted version of a previously unpublished Stilwell manuscript, *Glory of the Silver King*, a history of Texas and northeast Mexico tarpon and snook fishing in the earlier half of the twentieth century.

The manuscript, in its final version, will be available from Texas A&M Press in the Fall of 2010.

DEDICATION

I thank my lovely wife, Ashley, for stoically listening to my endless hours of bellyaching over start-overs, lost articles, and deadlines. If it wasn't for her everlasting patience, I fear she may have shot me on the spot.

I will also be remiss if I don't thank mom, Shirley Shuler, and dad, Bruce Shuler, for giving me the gift to read, teaching me to face up to any challenge I meet, and instilling a sense of awe and admiration for the great Deep Blue and her fishes. Thanks for giving me the solid foundation to launch myself in any direction my current whim may aim me.

And finally, for my little lucky charm, Parker; thank you for choosing me to be your daddy. May you always admire and protect the *Glory of the Silver King*. This is for you little man.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my committee chair, Dr. Robert Johnson, for his countless hours of intellectual discussion and mentoring. Without his tutelage, this thesis would not have been possible. His research methods and the way he makes fictional literature leap from the pages of novels is an inspiration. His encouragement and suggestions for editing *Glory of the Silver King* were invaluable. My thanks go to my committee members: Dr. Eric Miles Williamson, the last Beat; and Dr. Donald Newman, the last remaining man of the Enlightenment. Y'alls advice and forcing me to pay attention to the tiniest of literary detail has been a godsend and added a great source of pride to my writing.

I also want to thank Katherine Salzmann and Steven L. Davis, Assistant Curator of the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University. Their professionalism and knowledge of the Stilwell papers made my research and editing of *Glory of the Silver King* easier than it should have been.

I owe an everlasting debt to the Stilwell family, most notably, Hart's grandson, Ben Acosta-Hughes. His stories of his grandfather and willingness to allow me to publish *Glory of the Silver King* made this editing process a pleasure.

Thanks to my editor at Texas A&M Press, Dr. Shannon Davies, for her editorial direction and faith in a first timer. Thanks for answering all the phone calls and emails, and for listening to the same questions over and over.

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PART ONE

FINDING HART: THE LOST TEXT AND BIOGRAPHY OF HART STILWELL

BY
BRANDON D. SHULER

CHAPTER I

BORDERS, WAGONS, CAMPUS, AND A LIFE

> The writer of fiction, out of the mating of his own experience, imperfectly recorded, and his imagination, recreates a world, to which he attempts to give something of the reality of illusion. We demand that a novel, however romantic or 'experimental,' be in someway *true to life*; we demand of biography that it be *true to a life*.
>
> *The Art of Biography*
> Paul Murray Kendall

The New Critics would have us believe that we can read a poem as a poem or a novel as a novel, while separating authors from their words. In a pure academic sense this is possible; however, when paper and pen meet in many instances, the author's creation becomes a *de facto* confessional. As related by Leon Edel in *Literary Biography:*

> I have been struck in recent years by the attempts of certain critics to rule out biography from the criticism of literature. They argue that we must divorce the literary work from its creator, and while this has led, in a very healthy way, to an insistence upon the

> importance of the writer's text, it has also led to the view that the literary work is a mere artifact, to be examined as we would a vase or an ancient ornament in a museum. I find it difficult to accept such a dehumanization of literature. The literary voice, after all, is not one of the 'voices of silence;' it cannot be separated as easily as might be believed either from the speaker or from the listening world. (xiii)

Leaving the artist's creative works out of the equation of life, as the New Critics would have the critic do, cannot portray the color of an artist's life. Nor can a biography written solely from the dry leaves of day-to-day life provide a complete vision of the writer's life. If biographers are to write the true portrayal of a life, the author must look at all details and literary artifacts the subject has left behind.

The most famous example of literary biography we have to explore is the life of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's day-to-day life is lost to antiquity; however, a number of excellent Shakespeare biographies exist. To write a biography of the Great Bard, the biographer only has a partial picture of Shakespeare's life, a large dose of the political and communal society of his times, his plays and sonnets, the partial relationships that appear to exist in his lost retinue of friends, the incomplete jelly-belly rumblings of Dr. Jonson, and a lot of literary and historical conjecture. Anthony Burgess's *Shakespeare* exposes the major fallacy to the New Critics' approaches of tackling a writer's work without the author present. Burgess writes,

> If I discuss the content or technique of what Shakespeare and other men wrote, it is not with a view to providing literary history or literary criticism; it is because the people in this book are mostly professional writers, and what they attempted in their art often relates closely to what they did in their lives. (9)

Reflecting on the art and staring into the creative abyss of the artist, as Burgess suggests, is the catalyst that gives the biographer the most potent and realistic portrayal of the subject. It is a fine balance between professional distance and transference of life experience from the biographer that brings the subject alive for the reader. By studying the subject's creative works, the biographer is afforded an opportunity to see what makes the subject tick. The biographer must embrace the subject for both the excellencies in his character and the not-so-excellencies. To discover these traits, the subject leaves clues scattered throughout their creative outputs.

As authors we cannot escape the unintentional psychoanalytical aspects of lives that rear their ugly or pretty heads in our writing. Virginia Woolf, trying to explain away the confusion of her sexually transmutating subject in *Orlando*, writes:

> The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices that merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us...Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them;

> we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they
> mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking. (138)

If we substitute the use of "clothes" with the noun "words," we can see that Woolf is saying the words we use also "wear us and not we them." Thus, the words we use are moulded by the world around us, and it is evident that the stories we write are the lives we live. In Virginia Woolf's farcical biography, *Orlando,* she explores the delicacy of writing the biography of a life that spans 700+ years, which has the added twist of a transgender mutation. The sexual mutation of Orlando would prove problematic for a mere biographer, but not Woolf. For mere human biographers, it will require the best of the biographer's writing acumen and perseverance to write a believable portrayal of a sex-changing subject, especially in early 20th century England. The challenges of catching Orlando's gender-shifting, age-defying life that faced Woolf in *Orlando* are her satirical parody of the myriad of narrative struggles the biographer faces in the general practice of writing biography, albeit in conundrums far less difficult than a 700-year-old transvestite. There comes a point in the writing of biography that all leads and "truthful" artifacts expire, and the biographer must then rely upon literary ability rather than "truth." It is at this point, says Woolf, that

> The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better
> perhaps to confess than gloss over. Up to this point in telling the
> story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical,
> have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of a biographer, which
> is to plod, without looking right or left, in the indelible foot prints

> of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. (49)

The adherence to fact, as intimated by Woolf, will lead the biographer to the tombstone she envisions. It is this dead end of fact-based biography that challenges the biographer to find his subject elsewhere.

So what is the literary biographer to do when fact has expired? What if the facts are not sufficiently available to create a complete composite of the subject based solely on a saved paper trail? These questions are essential for the literary biographer; however, there are other factors at work which the biographer must address when creating the subject life: the readers. At some point, as Burgess, Woolf, and later, Nadel explore, the appraisal and narrative skill of the biographer are the tools that bring the subject alive. The biographer could simply write a fact by fact account of the subject's life, but would this narrative be readable?

For example, Shakespeare, for Burgess, was a lifetime fascination. Before writing *Shakespeare,* Burgess had already written two fictional works based on Shakespeare's life and works: one a full-length Hollywood script of the Bard's life, and the other a hastily put together volume to celebrate the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's birth. Burgess claims "there is a great deal of verifiable fact in both of these works, but there is also a great deal of guesswork, as well as some invention that has no basis even in probability" (9). This is the challenge of the modern biographer who is separated from the subject by time and breadth of verifiable literary artifacts. Burgess, however, saves

himself, the biographer of *Shakespeare*, with a few "educated" phrases, and by doing so reflects the difference between literary fiction and literary biography. Burgess tells us in the introduction to *Shakespeare*, "This present book contains conjecture–duly and timidly signaled by phrases like 'It well may be that...' or 'Conceivably, about this time...,' but it eschews invention." Burgess, the biographer, does not invent stories about the Bard. He uses the available literary artifacts at his disposal to create a composite of Shakespeare. He does admit, though, that in one section he "breaks through the cracked fanfares of caution," while trying to reconstruct the first stage appearance of *Hamlet.*

> Instead of saying that the actor Rice was probably, or possibly, a Welshman, I have asserted that he was, and even assigned parts like Fluellen and Sir Hugh Evans to him. The reader will recognize the fiction writer at work and, I hope, will make due allowances. All other assertions, in other chapters, can be accepted as true. (10)

The use of conjecture employed by Burgess, but softened by his "fanfares of caution," creates a culture of tension within the art of the literary biographer. How much fact should the literary biographer adhere to? Are facts the only tools the literary biographer should use? Or is there a healthy dose of conjecture and literary "inventiveness" that should invade the literary biography?

Ira Bruce Nadel, explores the use of pure fact in literary biography in *Biography: Fact, Form and Fiction.* The importance of fact he posits rests with the historical period in which the biography takes place. The seventeenth century and the rise of the

Enlightenment foisted a heavily truth-laden burden on the early biographer and spurned any artistic conjecture or narrative flourish on the author's part. The eighteenth century, with Kant, witnessed the rise of empiricism. The nineteenth century focused on the history surrounding the subject. Today's modern biographer must balance the weight of the subjects' personal experiences with the collective experiences of their society and pepper the work with a dash of fact and conjecture (Nadel 25-38). The biographer's move toward the personal experience, fact, and collective societal experience pushes the subject away from the perfect hero of legend and folklore, which dominated biography in the epics of Virgil and Homer, toward the reality of the imperfect human of real life that we begin to see in Boswell's *Life of Johnson.* This unavoidable move from oral tradition and legend building focused on making the subject's life the most realistic possible, without the benefit of artistic interjection by the biographer. Although this level of artistic narrative freedom does not return the art of biography to the realm of oral tradition, it does allow the biographer to create a more humanly accessible subject.

Today's biographers, however, roughly borne by Woolf's *Orlando*, are allowed a certain modicum of artistic design to render a more clear portrait of their subjects. Woolf, whose father was a biographer too, foresaw additional problems with using fact to paint a realistic picture of the subject. In her essay "The Art of Biography," she writes, "Almost any biographer, if he respects fact, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders" (259). Woolf's view frees the modern biographer from the constraints of sticking solely to the black and white facts. It gives biographers the ability to bring their

subjects to life and bring the reader closer to the subject's mien, rather than just a distanced look at artifacts such as IRS returns and grocery lists. Nadel agrees:

> This displacement of facts and their inability to explain configurations of a life highlight an entirely new approach to life-writing where the value of biography derives from the appraisal and presentation, rather than the accumulation and accuracy, of facts...Biography is fundamentally a narrative which has as its primary task the enactment of character and place through language–a goal similar to that of fiction. (8)

When I began the endeavor of writing Hart Stilwell's life, my initial thoughts were here is a guy that was one of the most prolific outdoor writers of the mid-twentieth century, the author of seven published books, a newspaper man and editor, and a full time journalist. With all this material at my disposal, what could be the difficulty of writing his biography?

Well, the problem, as defined by Stilwell in *Glory of the Silver King*, is that, although he was a prolifically published writer, he was a man who "collected memories, not things" (Stilwell, *Glory*). One of the things that Stilwell obviously, and surprisingly did not collect, or even keep, was a journal. As his biographer, I can write, from his journalistic output alone, a linear calendar biography of his life, but without benefit of journals and expansive correspondence that reveals the psychoanalytical workings of the man, I must find Hart elsewhere. To piece together the life of Stilwell, one must ignore the tenets of New Criticism and delve into the literary and journalistic works of Stilwell

to discover the man behind his creative “fictional” words. Stilwell, a rabid arbiter of truth, built a facade of himself as a man unafraid to take the high road in his journalistic endeavors and in his "fiction." In each of his fictional accounts, he thinly veils the main character, often a close facsimile of himself, as the hero and protector of the less fortunate. To find Hart, however, is to undertake a version of literary sleuthing.

Moreover, if we are to look at the works of Stilwell as pure "literary artifacts" as the New Critics recommend, we would also miss the intellectual development of a true Texas liberal, a man bent on protecting the underprivileged, and the development of one of the most unique voices of Texas letters. Looking at Stilwell's works as vaguely disguised autobiography, we can also capture an important snapshot of mid-twentieth century political Texas from the eyes and voice of a staunch Texas liberal who was shaped by the tumultuous political machinations of his time. The turmoil of the burgeoning Lyndon Baines Johnson years, the rise of the Texas Dixiecrats and Texas Regulars, and the witch-hunt of Congressional House Representative Martin Dies Jr. and his House un-American Activities Committee–all of this is an important context for any rounded discussions of 1940-1960s political Texas.

To piece together a life of a man that died twenty-three days before my birth can, at times be challenging, and has lead to many dead ends–literally and figuratively. This undertaking’s success depends on the literary artifacts that Stilwell left behind. As such, the biographer may paint an intimate portrayal between the reader and subject by "the kind of materials out of which the biography is created: the more intimate the evidence–letters, diary, reminiscences–the nearer the reader can be brought to the subject" (Kendall,

10). For example, the late Jack Cowan, famed Texas outdoor artist, had agreed to an interview with me to piece together some of the finer parts of the man Hart Stilwell. I wanted a better picture of the man A.C. Greene described, in *The Fifty Best Books on Texas*, as "an unpredictable cuss, [who] once at a party where a friend and I were singing and playing hymns, on a guitar and harmonica, he proceeded to strip off his clothes in protest and sit, stark naked, in the middle of the floor until we stopped. Then he talked" (Greene, 67). A couple of weeks before the interview, I read an article in *Lonestar Outdoors News* that the Texas icon, Jack Cowan, had died. I sent my condolences and marked one of the last living people that knew Stilwell in the unadulterated flesh off my list of sources.

Such are the woes of a biographer distanced from the subject by time as I am. As Leon Edel describes my chore, I am "the late coming biographer [that] hears only the rustling of the pages amid the silence of the tomb." (24) My tasks, as late-coming biographer, are to piece together the tenets of Stilwell's life that I can find in the last vestiges of the memory of a generation fast disappearing and try to glean from people that only knew Hart from the peripheries a living and breathing subject.

Yet my task, to write and define a man separated by me in time and by a couple of generations, is not as difficult as one may expect. Stilwell and I share a deep love of the ocean and outdoors, a compassionate heart, and we were shaped and molded as "gringos" living on the border of south Texas and Mexico bearing the "White Man's Burden" (Houghton-Allen). This commonality defined by Leon Edel as "transference," at once, can make the task of writing the biography both a challenge and a rewarding

journey of self-discovery. Edel, however, warns that it is the task of biographer not to cross the line between "biography and autobiography." This level of biographical writing as the biographer writes "is a kind of alchemy of the spirit; to succeed the biographer must perform the unusual–and the well-nigh impossible–act of incorporating into himself the experience of another, or shall we say, becoming for a while that other person, even while remaining himself" (Edel, *Writing* 24). This prestidigitation of alchemy relies on my professional distance from the subject, but at the same time embraces the common experiences that Stilwell and I share.

For the time being, Hart has left a dearth of tangible literary clues for me to define and write his life. He did, however, leave trails in his three novels.[i] Hart Stilwell Jr., the oldest son of Hartwell Stilwell and Anne Belle Pool, was born on May 13th, 1902 in Yoakum, Texas. During his literary career, Hart penned three lightly disguised autobiographical novels, *Border City* (1945), *Uncovered Wagon* (1947), and *Campus Town* (1950). He went on to author *Soggy Bottom #1* , *The Life and Times of Slats Rodgers* (1954), *Hunting and Fishing in Texas*, *Fishing in Mexico* (1951), and co-authored, with his wife Anne*, The Child Who Walks Alone* (1972).

Stilwell spent most of his childhood, as he relates in *Uncovered Wagon*, in the lower Rio Grande Valley. But as a young man, Hart escaped the Valley, moved to Austin,

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[i] To date, this dearth of information has hinged on a lack of researcher accessible archives. I, however, have been in negotiations with the surviving members of the Stilwell family, and I'm in the process of obtaining the remainder of his privately held papers, which I will donate to the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University.

and graduated from the University of Texas in 1924 with a degree in journalism. We find most of the autobiographical information of Stilwell's college days in *Campus Town*. Stilwell, however, as William Seward Burroughs describes Gary West, a mid-western transplant living in Mission, Texas, in *Junky*, "couldn't keep away from the Valley. He would run like a hooked fish until the drag of his dying cells tired him out and the Valley reeled him in" (Burroughs 89). Stilwell returned to the Valley to edit the *Brownsville Herald* from 1942 until 1944. In *Border City,* Stilwell's autobiographical alter ego, Dave Atwood, also works as a newspaper editor on the Texas borders. Stilwell took the themes and ideas for his three fiction-based novels straight from the days' headlines and from his own life.

In spite of calling these works "novels," Stilwell recognized limitations to his success as a fictional novelist. In a letter to J. Frank Dobie, Hart admits:

> I really should not write fiction—I should write editorials and articles. Since people will read a novel, even if it's characterization is poor, I am going to keep on with that kind of writing. There are many things in Texas besides the race question that need some more airing, and I hope to give them a little. (Stilwell Letter)

Stilwell, although he is trying to convince Dobie, or maybe even himself, that he is writing fiction, in fact, submitted his draft of *Border City* to Doubleday as a non-fiction book, and upon the insistence of the editor, rewrote the work as a fictional love story.

If we look at the scope of the writings that Stilwell described as "his life's work" to J. Frank Dobie, the three texts, if we explore them as the "education" of Hart Stilwell,

we must rearrange the publication dates and study them as follows: *Uncovered Wagon* as the autobiographical detail of his life as a child from his first conscious memory as a four year old, until he leaves for the "University at Austin" with his blind brother; *Campus Town* as the intellectual growth of an impressional, young, college man into the idealistic liberal adult that will define Hart for the rest of his life; and finally *Border City* as a culmination and test of the man's ideals applied to the cruel multi-racial world of the pre-World War II Rio Grande Valley. By piecing together these three "fictional" novels, we can paint a complete portrait of Hart Stilwell's life and intellectual development.

CHAPTER II

THE EARLY YEARS: *UNCOVERED WAGON*

There's a funny thing about families: what one member witnesses or experiences may not be the same experience or circumstance the other kinfolk recall. If one of those members is an author willing to release any skeleton out of the familial closet, well then, things can get interesting. Hart Stilwell's *Uncovered Wagon* is one of those situations.

For that reason, Stilwell's mother, Anne Belle Poole, vehemently opposed the publishing of *Uncovered Wagon* during her lifetime. Before marrying Hartwell Stilwell Sr., a Texas Ranger, drifter, murderer, and grifter, Anne Poole was raised in the fairly well-bred household of her father, an insurance broker from Corpus Christi. And while her husband-to-be was educating himself on the free-wheeling, unfenced expanses of the southwest's frontier, Anne Poole was earning a degree from the Sam Houston Normal School. Anne's objections to the publication of *Uncovered Wagon* arose from a sense of pride: she did not want her family remembered as a fractured, poor, and drifting household living in the midst of deprivation, mental abuse and torture by the words and at the hands of a rapacious alcoholic.

As a way to please and assuage his mother's sense of pride, Stilwell opens *Uncovered Wagon* with an author's note of disclaimer:

> Although this book spans the transition from the stagecoach to the airplane in one odd little section of this nation, and the things that are related here are in a general way, a part of history, still the book is a novel. The "Father" and "Mother" of the book are not my father and mother. The sisters and brothers are not mine. The "I" is not I. (Stilwell, *Uncovered* iii)

Yet as awkwardly and thinly as Stilwell attempted to mask the autobiographical content of *Uncovered Wagon*, his daughter, Mary Gray Hughes, in the 1974, Texas Monthly Press Edition of *Uncovered Wagon*, reveals his subterfuge and writes in her foreword:

> *Uncovered Wagon* is autobiography. Hart Stilwell, who was my father, wrote it as autobiography and intended to publish it that way, but he did not have the heart to override the strenuous objections of his mother during her lifetime...Some members of Hart Stilwell's family may still, as family members sometimes do, see their common history from different angles and in different ways, but *Uncovered Wagon* is Hart Stilwell's life–this is how he saw it, how he lived it, and how he wrote it. (Stilwell, *Uncovered* iv)

Uncovered Wagon is the story of the Endicott family on the south Texas border at the turn of the twentieth century. The narrative explores the fractured and contentious relationship of the young Billy Endicott and his father, the Old Man. We see a poverty-stricken family trying to survive in the harsh environment of untamed lands on the Texas

frontier. We follow Billy through his early childhood years, until he leaves for college with his younger, blind brother, Robert. We witness Billy become the protector of his family from the wrath of the Old Man after the death of his older brother, Duke. And ultimately, we see the Old Man's and Billy's relationship change as time and age reveal each other and redefines the father and son dynamic.

When exploring Stilwell's canon and life, we have to start with *Uncovered Wagon* because it represents the childhood of his life and the developmental episodes Hart experiences during life with the Old Man. Don Graham quotes Texas journalist, Stanley Walker, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, as describing *Uncovered Wagon* as a "sort of 'Life with Father' in a particularly lowdown setting" (Stilwell, *Uncovered* x). Graham continues and adds to Walker's assessment that the book is not only about "life with father," but is a book solely about the father, or the Old Man as Stilwell's Billy Endicott calls him. Taken at quick face value this may hold true; however, there are deeper currents running in the narrative that affords the reader a view into the mind and mores that shaped the man, Stilwell, who lives within the limited and tumultuous universe of the Old Man. The Old Man is merely the backdrop and catalyst of the intellectual development that will define who Stilwell becomes.

John Steinbeck described the move of the American man west as "westering." Hartwell Sr. was one of these men who slept under the stars, rode horses and drove cattle, and worked for a small portion of his life as a “special” Texas Ranger, in the 1890s. This "westering," frontier soul that manifested itself in the Old Man was stereotypical of the

later boom-and-bust creature that roamed the American west searching for overnight fortune. The Old Man, never content with living a settled life and cultivating the developed land he worked from the south Texas scrub, could easily survive in the harshest environment and even provide well for his family until the wanderlust of the wild frontier called to him. Once he becomes "settled," or "fenced-in," as Dobie would term it, the Old Man hatches a new hare-brained scheme that will hopefully lead to his family's *El Dorado*. The Old Man will pack house and family into the wagon and go in search of their fortune. Lashing out against the notion of domestication he threatens to kill himself and take the kids with him over such simple affronts as the Mother making baking-soda rather than flour-biscuits. The Old Man's frontier-forged loyalty, though, never allows him to abandon his family. Still, he leaves them close to ruin on numerous occasions. Stilwell's young, alter ego, Billy says, "Looking back on it now, I wonder why he never abandoned his flock, riding on back out to the West that at least meant freedom as he interpreted freedom" (Stilwell, *Uncovered* 34).

The revelation of the Old Man as an unhappy man, the first insight of the young Endicott, gives us a deep psychoanalytical view into the burgeoning adult psyche of Hart Stilwell. The fear and torture of the family, and especially Billy's experience at the hands of the Old Man, creates a persona in Hart who was always on the verge of self-deprecation or subservience. Hart, as witnessed through his correspondence with J. Frank Dobie, was a vapid pleaser and strove to find acceptance by fatherly–or authoritative–figures. In letter after letter Stilwell appears to curry favor with the elder man of Texas Folklore. Stilwell is constantly offering his assistance in matters ranging

from taking care of Dobie's sick mother to offering to head Dobie's ill-advised run at governor. This characteristic of Stilwell reflects the constant disapproval the alter-ego Billy receives from the Old Man. Each character Stilwell colors as his fictional self is always the protagonist and later protector, and each has an overseeing fatherly figure that provides sage wisdom and direction in life-altering situations.

In *Uncovered Wagon*, we see the development of this character trait as he grows to accept the Old Man and eventually grow from a tormented boy to the protector of the Old Man. In *Uncovered Wagon*, the desire to please shows itself must notably, though, through the relationship between Billy and the Mother. The mother's greatest desire is to see her children get an education and become respectable members of society. Even in their abject poverty, the mother attempts to make the young ladies of the family presentable and the boys young gentlemen. In the most provocative moments, when it appears young Billy is attempting to side with the Old Man in another of the baking-soda biscuit battles, Stilwell's character placates the mother's growing rage by backing down and revealing she is correct. Stilwell, always the pleaser, even takes the Mother's pride and joy, the blind child, Richard, to the Austin State School for the Blind when he leaves for college. The devotion to the fictional Richard (Robert in real life) does not end with the trip north. In his attempts to please, Stilwell finds himself, each Sunday during college, giving the blind children at the school a ride on the back of his bike and providing them candy. These trips to see his brother stemmed from a promise kept his mother to visit the poor child in the hospital each week. But his devotion to his blind brother and his mother continued for life. In a 1946 letter to Dobie, to please his mother

and protect Robert, Stilwell pleads with Dobie to help his brother find a job in the University of Texas's English Department, which apparently Dobie did attempt. The mother's wishes to see her children educated and part of society were antithesis to the father's ranging ways. By capturing a university job, the blind brother will be set for life and not subjected to the whims of poverty.

In contrast, on the edge of frontier and near complete financial ruin, the Old Man, to entertain the family and see them through rough times, cold nights and empty bellies, regales the family with food for the brain rather than the stomach with the stories of his frontiering wild west days before marriage and children. The two able-bodied boys, Duke and Billy, escape into the wild of the Old Man's old west; however, the affects the stories have on both will have drastically different consequences. The father's stories, however, are not enough to quench the gnawing hunger that persists from waking to bed. The hardships and turmoil of packing up for frequent moves creates in Stilwell a desire for stability that the mother wishes for Robert and all of her children. In a sense, Stilwell's tumultuous childhood was rebelling against the Old Man, and this insight reveals Stilwell could never live the rambling, ranging life like the Old Man. Stilwell's unlanded childhood foisted by the rambling nature of the Old Man and the Mother's desire to build a stable home like she enjoyed as a child, perhaps, contributed to Hart's desire to be rooted to a community; therefore, he inherently had to rebel against the Old Man's frontier.

Billy and his older brother appreciate the wild frontier stories of the Old Man, and for a time, Billy entertained thoughts of becoming an Indian rather than a Ranger like his

dad. He imagined himself an Indian, so he could shoot the Old Man. By contrast to Hart's rebelling nature to anything representing the character or nature of the Old Man, in the novel, there is "Duke," based on Stilwell's older brother who died at the age of 19 in similar circumstances as the fictional brother. In *Uncovered Wagon*, Duke follows in the footloose, frontiering and galavanting ways of the Old Man. On the trail, between moves and often starving under the bright stars of Texas, the Old Man entertains the boys of the family with stories of the Old West and murdering and rangering and driving cattle. The romanticism, though, is too heavy for Duke, and Duke desired to become just like the Old Man and live an old west inspired lifestyle. Duke's desire, and healthy stubbornness against the tyranny of the Old Man, leads him to leave the house and become a cowhand riding the line of a nearby ranch.

The ranch, although this is pure speculation, must have been either the King, Kenedy or Armstrong Ranch. The story of Duke's last days begins when the family had moved north, near the coastal town of Hacketts, a cold and remote place north of the "citrus orchards" of the Rio Grande Valley. Billy Endicott describes the ranch as a large tract that surrounded the small coastal village. Stilwell describes the power of these ranches:

> I learned that the ranch people 'fixed thing up.' The man Duke shot got well, and Duke, because of his youth and the fact that there was a romantic element in the shooting, something that always appeals to Texans, was permitted to plead guilty and receive a suspended sentence. The fact that the ranch people controlled the

> community and the county probably figured in the proceedings.
> (133)

These revelations, although they require more in depth research, can only lead the researcher to believe the ranches in fact were either the King, Kenedy or Armstrong. The sizes and proximity of the ranches to the coast and Rio Grande Valley provide us the hints. Stilwell even makes the correlation more enticing when he writes, “The fact that the ranch people controlled the community and the county probably figured into the proceedings.” During the 1910s, the period in which *Uncovered Wagon* is set, the control of the King Ranch had been transferred to Richard King’s son-in-law, Bob Kleberg. The King Ranch is located just outside of Kingsville, which is the county seat of Kleberg county. The Kenedy Ranch, just south of Kingsville, is in Kenedy county. The coincidences are too tantalizing to not make the politically powerful ranch parallels.

Duke's dalliance with his dad's old way of life removes the eldest son from the house and focuses the Old Man's wrath on the older girls of the family and on his mother. To fill the protectorate void that Duke represents, Billy is foisted into the roll of protecter, when after a short time Duke dies "the way he had lived, by violence” (134). The story of Duke, though, highlights an early learning experience in the young Stilwell that manifests itself throughout Stilwell's professional and adult life. As we will see later in *Campus Town* and *Border City*, Stilwell, even as a child, witnessed the power of "political connection" and the fringe benefits it can afford. Stilwell’s first experience with the power of political connections is positive, as reflected by the power of the ranch to get Duke out of trouble. As we will see later in *Campus Town* we witness a shift in

Stilwell’s perception of political power being benevolent to one where political power can be malevolent. This shift in Stilwell’s perception begins to develop the astute political eye he casts on the political machine later in life.

Stilwell's early experiences with the political machine of the wealthy ranch owners were favorable in his youth. His intellectual growth in college, though, changes those perceptions and presents Hart with the catalyst he needs to write *Border City*. Duke's story, in the greater sense and tradition of a big brother educating a younger one, represents the first major learning experience in the young Stilwell's life.

Duke's unintentional lesson, the Old Man's tyranny, and the mother's insistence on education are strong themes in *Uncovered Wagon*; however, missing from the summary of the novel are the lessons a young boy of the frontier learned by simply observing the world around him. Was it the eye of the burgeoning journalist, the outdoorsman, or simply the frequent shift of his surrounding environment that caused Stilwell to take notice of the disappearing wildlife around him? Regardless of the reason, in *Uncovered Wagon*, we begin to see the ardent environmental conservationist appear that will shape Stilwell's career after the 1940s.

In the chapters "Battles in the Wild" and "The Yankee Horde," we see the polemic against man's intrusion into areas that were not their own. Was it the sense of displacement Stilwell felt as a young child when the family moved to a new town that made him so cognizant of outsiders’ intrusions upon someone's turf? Or did the infractions of those who moved into new areas and the subsequent human impact on the

environment and wildlife make him such an outspoken conservationist? The answers to the two questions highlight the complexity of the man.

In "Battles in the Wild," Stilwell begins to outline his views of man's incursion into the wild. He paints a picture of a virtual Eden in the small town of Greenville, which by its description in relation to the Rio Grande River appears to be Pharr or Mission, Texas. The Eden he paints is "a land where people did not even hunt since it was not necessary to penetrate the brushland that far for game–the wildlife around us was so plentiful it became a nuisance" (53). The deer, which are destroying their crops, are so thick that his father and brother have to take turns at night staying awake to shoot them. White-wing dove, which his father never shoots due to their diminutive size, are so numerous in the Rio Grande Valley that their numbers, Billy Endicott reasoned, rivals that of the millions of passenger pigeons that used to take to the skies. Coyotes and wolves live side by side and play havoc with his mother's chickens. And some nights, in the calm of the witching-hour, a lady's scream would pierce the night. The ladies scream, of course to the outdoorsman, is the scream of the black puma. The puma coincidently is no longer a part of the menagerie of Rio Grande Valley fauna. In fact, until recently, the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico were believed no longer to have large cats roaming its slopes; however, this has changed recently through the efforts of a number of concerned individuals who created a large cat refuge and have reintroduced mountain lions and pumas back into the wild.

The situation Stilwell describes, a disappearing population of local wildlife, is a typical Stilwell subject for a polemic. In *Uncovered Wagon*, *Glory of the Silver King*,

Fishing in Mexico, *Hunting and Fishing in Texas* and most of his outdoors journalism, this theme is visited frequently. The theme took root early in the frontier roaming young Stilwell. His appreciation of the beauty of nature is evident in “Battles of the Wild” in *Uncovered Wagon*. He worships the wild bulls that roam among the scrub and huisache who could have been remnants of the herds rustled by Juan Cortina himself who was chased by McNelly across the river and back into the Mexican interior. Captivated by the iridescent beauty of the green jay, young Billy tries, unsuccessfully, to pen raise the jays who feed on the back step with the chickens and bob-whites. Stilwell’s affection for aviary takes deep root; later in life, Stilwell writes extensively in *Sports Illustrated, Field & Stream,* and *Sports Afield* about the challenges and rewards of pen-raising wild birds. Stilwell, though, adhering to his anti-human intrusion into wildlife creed, denounces genetic tampering with wild game. Stilwell’s greatest denouncement is outlined in the unpublished manuscript, *The Great White Bird and Other Immaculate Toys. The Great White Bird,* a genetically altered turkey, is an extension upon the environmental message Stilwell builds in *Glory of the Silver King.*

Stilwell loves the wilderness and wildlife of the frontier, and it all leaves a deep impression on him. The wilderness is his escape. Into the woods he disappears to escape the drunken, violent attacks wielded by the Old Man. Maybe it was the protection the wilderness offered him that gave rise to his desire to protect the wilderness and wildlife in return. Stilwell held a place in his heart that loved the chicken stealing coyote, the night piercing screams of the puma, the calls of the bob-white, the sky-darkening clouds of white-wings, and the lowing bray of the wild longhorn. It was "during that first year [the

animals] were all a part of their lives–we battled with some and enjoyed others." But as much as he loves it, he realizes the forays of man into the wild are making it disappear. Stilwell decries man as he moves into the wild. He realizes he is part of the problem that is rooting out the local faunae:

> But as other farmers came and more and more land was cleared the brushline was pushed farther away, so that Duke and I had to make fairly long trips to hunt. The longhorn began to disappear–the game started thinning out. And even the Mexican disappeared, in effect, from our lives, and there came a people who were stranger to me than the longhorns and the Mexicans and the rattlesnakes. I had never seen such people before.
>
> They were the Yankees. (Stilwell, *Uncovered* 58)

Even as Stilwell recognized that he, like the yankees, is part of the intruding problem, he cannot stop his father's need to be on the edge of the frontier. Later in life, the lessons learned from those days encroaching on the wild revisited Stilwell while writing *Fishing in Mexico*. In a letter to J. Frank Dobie, he confesses remorse for exposing the people of Mexico and their fisheries to the "Nordic Horde." After witnessing what the first wave of Yankees does to his beloved lower Rio Grande Valley during the rise of the Magic Valley in the teens and 20s, a sentiment he shared with his contemporaries Jovita Gonzalez and John Houghton-Allen, he fears what the hordes who read his books will do to the unsuspecting populations south of the Rio Grande River.

The book concludes with an account of his father's last few years. In the introduction of the Texas Monthly Press edition, Don Graham, describes *Uncovered Wagon* as "Stilwell's best book because it is his most honest and the least sentimental" (Stilwell, *Uncovered* xi). However, the last few chapters are actually full of deep feelings for the Old Man. Slipping into dementia, the Old Man is convinced his next great frontier lays across the Pacific in a faraway land named Australia. He dreams that he will soon go there and deliver the riches he had always promised his family. Billy knows this will never happen but entertains the Old Man's dreams anyway. We see a softening of the conflict between the aging Billy and the dying Old Man and the reader witnesses the paradigmatic shift that encounters all fathers and sons when they first see each other as men. Stilwell's writing powerfully captures this shift between Billy and the Old Man. The older Billy, now with a family of his own, says:

> One of the Old Man's few remaining pleasures during those declining years was taking people on conducted tours of his place...I know I followed him around that little nursery at least five hundred times, and I'm sorry now it wasn't a thousand times, for no matter how much of a devil he was the Old Man was near the end and he was lonely and he desperately needed the company and sympathy and understanding of his fellow man. (Stilwell, *Uncovered* 292)

Yet in its sentimentality, *Uncovered Wagon* accomplishes the task Stilwell sets forth in the fictional trilogy compromising his autobiography: we witness the freeing of the son's

spirit from the overbearing nature of the Old Man's. As the Old Man lies in bed dying for the last year of his life, Stilwell realizes that he is not as far separated from his father as he had wished. The same stubbornness and orneriness that pushed him to hate his father makes him more like his father than even Duke. What Stilwell witnesses in himself is the same rebellion that like-minded fathers and sons have experienced for millennia. The draw of hating each other forces the son to take the opposite stances and beliefs of the father.

A good example of this is Stilwell's later alliance with liberal politicians his father would have hated. The Old Man's frontier, don't mess with me attitude, was fine while the lower Rio Grande Valley was still a wild and untamed place untouched by government intrusion. Once the FDA and Agriculture Department began to infringe upon his rights to grow any fruit or plant that he saw fit to grow in the fertile soil of the river delta, the Old Man lashed out violently at the New Deal. In fact, the Old Man, a stalwart lover of roses, always has an award winning bed of roses growing even during the hardest and poorest of times. At one point, with the FDA and Agricultural Department breathing down his neck for growing fruit fly inviting peaches in his garden, the Old Man stubbornly renames his most beloved rose, Roosevelt, to Landon, Roosevelt's right-leaning political opponent. Conversely, as we will see in *Campus Town* and then *Border City*, Stilwell embraces the doctrines of the New Deal and becomes a strident denouncer of Roosevelt haters such as syndicated newspaper columnist Westbrook Pegler and a devoted follower of the political left.

Uncovered Wagon leaves the reader with the young Stilwell's early childhood "education" complete. As we will see in his other two books of the trilogy, *Border City* and *Campus Town*, the events that round the sharp edges leave us with a true account of the man that will become the journalist and author Hart Stilwell. Although Stilwell gives us a blurry portrait of the things that happen to him in college in *Uncovered Wagon*, we see the intellectual development of the day-to-day education he receives on the 40 acres in *Campus Town*.. As we explore *Campus Town*, we will watch the young pioneer of the south Texas border become "citified" and examine the tumultuous times that shapes the narrative, the man, and the face of Texas politics, and how Stilwell learned to operate in the world of the politically "connected" that helped Duke out of his troubles. We will find that Stilwell first embraces the life of the connected; soon, however, he abandons it because of acrimonious and conniving forces that his sheltered, parochial life on the border left him unprepared to face.

CHAPTER III

FORGING THE IDEALIST: *CAMPUS TOWN*

College, for most young people, is a time of awakening to intellectual development and questioning. Entering college freshman come with a litany of values and ideals that are forged by their parents line of thinking, religion, and politics. The new ideas and intellectual stimulation they receive from classmates and professors make students question their beliefs and, for many, weaken the resolve of the ideals they have only recently begun to steel in their later teens. During college matriculation, typically a cathartic moment occurs that forces students to look inward and begin developing their own sets of values and ideas. *Campus Town* is Stilwell's take on his trial by fire in the collegiate arena.

Don Graham calls *Campus Town* "Stilwell's weakest attempt at fiction and most sentimental book" (Stilwell, *Uncovered* viii). The novel, in fact, is awkward because it attempts to wrap a narrative set in the 1920s around the Homer Rainey University of Texas firing imbroglio of the 1940s. Although it can be as preachy and didactic as Graham accuses it of being, the novel is Stilwell's honest attempt to explain the circumstances that molded his early-adult intellectual development. The attempt to wrap the political culture of the 1940s into the political shell of the 1920s admittedly is a mistake, but Stilwell has to set the novel in the 20s to be true to the vaguely veiled trilogy of autobiography he was writing.

Stilwell's attempt to set the story in the 1920s, rather than the 1940s, maybe due to the political culture of Texas during the writing and publication of the *Campus Town*. The politics of 1940s Texas was forged by a fanatic move toward conservatism, which was fueled by the growing red-scare of Post-World War II America and the rise of the Cold War. With Texas Congressman Martin Dies Jr. heading the House Un-American Activities Committee, Hart may have feared blacklisting or political retaliation for the criticism *Campus Town* piled upon the factions responsible for the Rainey firing. Ultimately, but barely, Stilwell succeeds in hiding this anachronism, but it requires some suspension of belief on the reader's part and a leap of artistic conjecture by the author.

Campus Town is the story of Lester "Lefty" Mason, a bright and talented student journalist and heat-tossing left-handed pitcher who is too idealistic for his own good. The novel opens with Lefty trapped in the backseat of a car between two hooded Ku Klux Klan members who beat him for his role in outing a couple of Klan members at a past Jew "whipping." The Klan represents a cabal of individuals that control *Campus Town's* State University's newspaper, constitutes the upper echelon of the university's administration, and are the controlling business interests in the local community.

Stilwell may have been conflating the Klan of the 1920s with the Texas Regulars of the 1940s. The Texas Regulars represented Big Oil interests across the state and were strong allies with Governors Pappy O'Daniel and Coke Stevenson. They were against homosexuality, pro-labor measures, educational freedom, integration, and the New Deal. The Regulars could trace their original core membership to the conservative American Christians Movement that originated in Oklahoma but drifted south with oil interests and

money. The growing backlash of conservatism that gave rise to the Regulars stemmed from Anti-New Dealers who opposed Roosevelt's Worker's Project Administration programs. The New Deal or any mere threat that had, or appeared to have, socialistic tendencies was demonized by the House Un-American Activities Commission headed by Houston Congressional Representative Martin Dies. The growing roster of anti-communist groups and anti-New Deal organizations insured through the "red-scare" gaining of the common man's vote. Employing scare tactics to recruit a vast voter base allowed the Regulars to recruit powerful political stalwarts such as Coke Stevenson, Martin Dies, the O'Daniels, Maco Stewart of Galveston's Stewart Title Company, and a virtual who's who of Texas big business. Once these pieces where in place, the Regulars survival, and ultimate control of Texas politics, was guaranteed. The leap to equate the Texas Regulars to the Klan was an essential yet easy leap for Stilwell to make. The Texas Regulars were openly white supremacist; in fact, "a party plank...called for the restoration of the supremacy of the white race." (Burrough, *Big* 138) During the Rainey firing, and through the political machinations of Governors O'Daniel and Stevenson, the University of Texas Board of Regents was composed of five Texas Regulars (Burrough, *Big*; Green, *Establishment*; Keith, *Eckhardt*).

The significantly named "Lefty" is a wide-eyed country boy that is scraping by to send himself to college. His first day priorities are to enroll in freshman classes and find a job. Stilwell, in writing the enrollment experience, reveals the alienation and differences Lefty felt from his fellow students. As we learned in *Uncovered Wagon*,

Stilwell left for school poor in a borrowed pair of shoes. He picks up in *Campus Town* where *Uncovered Wagon* leaves off. As he waits in line behind four classmates, he compares the quality and tailoring of the two males clothes in the group ahead of him to his own inferior threads.

> The young man in front of him wore a lavender suit of smooth, expensive-looking material. The youth behind him wore a green suit. It also looked expensive. Lefty's mottled yellow-and-brown was shabby in contrast, although it had filled him with pride the day he received it from the mail-order house and first put it on. His suit had a rough finish, and one could pull horsehairs out of it at will. His clothes marked him. (8)

This line recalls images of Stilwell's life raised on the border in poverty. Here is an idealistic young man who strives to be part of the establishment and become somebody, or better yet fulfill his mother's wish to get an education and become greater part of society. Yet the clothes and lower class of society that they represented tied him to a part of his upbringing that "would have to be changed too"(8).

Stilwell's distinctive classification of social class as "the have and have-nots" mired him in a black and world with very little shade of gray. His right or wrong attitude thus tied his world view to the Old Man of *Uncovered Wagon*. The orneriness of either all-right or all-wrong that Stilwell, or the young Endicott, denounced in his father was so ingrained within himself he was unaware of the similarities. It was this strong sense of right and wrong, though, that leads to the idealistic struggle that shapes and molds the

narrative arc of *Campus Town* and the subsequent character growth that comes from it in Lefty. These distinctive character traits, moreover, control all of his actions and highlight the tumultuous dichotomy of spirit which defines 1940s Texas, the shift from an agrarian economy to an oil and big business based economy.

After enrolling in classes, Lefty's next chore is to find a job. Lefty wants, as Stilwell did, to major in journalism. He, however, has to find a paying job to put himself through college. The Fictional father in *Campus Town* is a trained printer. Lefty grew up working in the various print shops where his father was employed, so with a marketable skill-set he approached the campus print shop for a job. The foreman, Mike, informs him that students did not work in the print shop, they worked as editors and journalists for the *ECHO,* "for free and for the love of the job" as the editor, Rube, informed Lefty (13). However, when he turns Lefty away, Mike asks him to leave his name. When Lefty does and Mike discovers he is a Lester, he asks Lefty for his father's name. Mike and Andrew Lester, at one point, worked in the same shop. The connection between workingman and workingman's son is enough to get Lefty a part time job in the shop.

The print job creates another black and white situation in the narrative. Lefty does not fit in with the workingmen, and they decry his reluctance to join the printers union. Conversely, the student editors and reporters continuously goad Lefty for joining the ranks of the working man. This diametric sets the tension and overall arcing theme of character development for Stilwell in *Campus Town*: does he embrace the workingman's ethic in which he was raised or does he use the college background to climb out of the workingman's abyss and become part of the establishment?

Most of *Campus Town* finds Lefty struggling to answer this question throughout the book. Stilwell faced the same questions in his life. Stilwell did write for the University of Texas school newspaper, the *San Antonio Light*, and numerous Texas newspapers while attending college, just as Lefty does. In *Campus Town*, Lefty works for local businessmen and the President of State College, Dr. Randolf Clay, as the head of marketing for an annex of the college. This increases his monthly income from forty dollars to six-hundred and fifty a month. In Stilwell's 1920s, he worked on the marketing campaign for the University of Texas's new football stadium. But where we see the autobiographical collegiate years in Lefty' experiences, we also see the intellectual development of the young and professional newspaperman Stilwell became after college. Stilwell uses his biographical information to bookend the story of *Campus Town* and create an imaginable scene for the reader when he hits the crux of his story.

Campus Town is really two stories wrapped in one text. We witness the confusion and jading of an idealistic young man, and we see Stilwell's criticism of state politics. Lefty's black-and-white nature rears its head with the normal choices a young student must make as they move through their college years. Lefty must face joining, or not joining a fraternity, which would be the epitome of validating his social-class acceptance; trusting his roommate as a person or mistrusting him as a Klan member; and the dilemma of using a prostitute to enjoy sex, while judging his first love for her dalliances with the opposite sex. We watch as Stilwell's Lefty works his way through these situations, and we are left wondering if these are the things Stilwell confronted during his college years. A few things we do know for certain: Stilwell does not have a record of joining a

fraternity; and knowing Stilwell's struggles with the political machine of south Texas, his denouncement of Westbrook Pegler, and his ardent support of Mexican-American civil rights, we know Stilwell would have most likely discouraged his roommate from joining the Klan. In fact, we see an interesting dynamic in Stilwell's attitudes toward race. How could an Anglo raised in the patron system of the Rio Grande River Valley become so sympathetic to the Mexican civil rights cause? Stilwell's racial attitudes could have developed from witnessing the hatred and vitriol the Old Man aimed against the Mexican's in *Uncovered Wagon*. In a sense, Stilwell could have been leveling "positive" rebellion against the father. But if we are to pay this form of rebellion credence, we must also explore the tenet that the poor, frontier wandering Billy Endicott of *Uncovered Wagon,* who Stilwell transforms into Lefty Lester in *Campus Town,* relates better to the transient, barefooted and broken Mexicans who Billy would more readily identified himself with and thus create an empathetic awareness of the Mexican's racial plight.

We don't see much of Stilwell's, the author, unwavering trust in mankind in *Uncovered Wagon*, but we begin to see it develop here in *Campus Town*. It does not, however, show itself until the end of the story, when his Klan hood-wearing roommate comes to Lefty's and Emily's rescue as the Klan kidnaps them for a good 'ol night of lynching and whipping. We see through Stilwell's other works, most notably in *Border City* in the character of the Jewish attorney, Dave Atwood's father figure, his belief in the good of human nature. Did an experience occur in Stilwell's college days that built this unwavering trust in mankind or was it simply a holdout from his days with dad and he witnessed the inherent goodness in mankind through the protection of his brother Duke

and doting sisters? To answer this question, though, we also have to explore the liberal indoctrination of University of Texas students during the period. State College in *Campus Town,* like the University of Texas, is inundated with left-leaning professors and faculty. It's not a long stretch to see how the establishment-climbing Lefty soon vanquished the simple conservative idealism he possesses at the beginning of *Campus Town* and abandons the notion to become one of the "politically connected," like those that helped Billy's brother Duke out of trouble in *Uncovered Wagon*. Stilwell shows us his unwavering trust but tempers it always with a healthy skepticism, as we see in the text and his dedications. He believes in the tenets of a free nation; he dedicates *Border City* "to the belief that all men are created equal," but yet shows us throughout his entire pantheon that they are not.

The most personal part of *Campus Town* is Lefty's struggles with the opposite sex. Mike, the print shop foreman, ready for a night of celebration after Lefty is elected editor of the *Echo*, springs for Lefty's evening with a prostitute. Was this how Stilwell lost his virginity? Stilwell, like Lefty, was a poor farm boy with little to no experience with the ladies outside of familial relationships. It does not take a large stretch of the imagination to believe this was Stilwell's introduction to the world of love. In fact, Stilwell lets us know exactly what he thinks about prostitutes and describes in detail the act of employing them in *Glory of the Silver King*. In fact, Stilwell is so happy with the attitudes of the Mexicans toward prostitution that he gushes like a kid in a candy shop:

> In Mexico the attitude towards prostitution, which has always been legal, is quite different from the attitude here. It is pretty generally

> accepted that any man able to finance the procedure will visit whorehouses and maybe his favorite there–maybe eventually set her up in a little place of her own...I'm not concerning myself with the relative moral values, I merely say that I have enjoyed this part of the Mexican culture down through the years–and with no feeling of guilt. (34)

Stilwell is proud to brag of his conquests in Tampico and his veracity of using the service as often as possible. Did Lefty's college experience equate to Stilwell's and did this experience persist throughout his life?

Beyond the autobiographical attributes and stories, though, the thesis of *Campus Town* is reflected most poignantly in Stilwell's criticism of the Homer Rainey affair. Where Graham initially claims Campus Town to be "overtly didactic and sentimental," he falls short of the true narrative intent of the story. To read Campus Town with Hart's intent, one must be imbrued in the culture of early 1940s politics, especially the Homer Rainey firing.

Homer Rainey was elected to the presidency of University of Texas under the Governor Allred administration. During that time, the board of regents was still a fairly liberal institution and valued intellectual freedoms. Those preaching a fear of a growing communist threat and of Roosevelt's WPA, though, were threatening to take over Texas politics, which they eventually did under the power-mongering of the Texas Regulars and Martin Dies. Rainey had headed the National Youth Commission, an unfortunately

named NGO who had a sister NGO called the National Youth Association. The NYA, which had communist ties, had nothing to do with Rainey, but it fueled the red-scare Texas political agendas operating at the time. As early as January 1940, Governor O'Daniel had already formed a cabal of powerful oil magnates and leading businessmen to challenge the make-up of the University of Texas Board of Regents. The first battle came when Houston board of regent D.F. Strickland passed a small note to Rainey and said, "I want you to fire these men"(Green, 84). The four names on the note were economic professors; not coincidently, the professors under fire from the Klan in *Campus Town* are economics professors as well. Luckily for the University of Texas professors under fire, economics professor Dr. Robert Montgomery, the 1940 Chairman of the Board of Regents, was an Allred holdover. After the board chair read Dr. Montgomery's published books, he concluded the professor was merely a New Dealer, not a communist.[i]

After failing to get the four economic professors fired, the board of regents shifted tactics and went after the unwanted professors by changing tenure rules. To confound the economics professors' fates, anti-labor rallies were springing up across Texas. The most vexing for Rainey was lead by Karl Hoblitzelle, a Dallas movie magnate. It is interesting

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[i] Information on the Homer Rainey imbroglio was compiled from a number of sources. The main texts are George Norris Green's *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years* and Gary A. Keith's *Eckhardt: There Once Was a Congressman from Texas*. Where a specific text is quoted, I have parenthetically referenced the proper text and page number. *The Texas Handbook–On-Line,* Dobie and Stilwell Correspondence, and Bryan Burrough's *The Big Rich* also contributed heavily to this section.

to note here that the business man paying Lefty's 650-dollar-a-month salary, Homer Wade, owned all of the movie theaters in town (Stilwell, *Campus* 258). The rally's advertisement depicted larger-than-life Japanese soldiers wielding large guns bearing down on a group of American soldiers armed with popguns. The overwhelming message of the advertisement was that the union dominated arms manufacturers in America were killing American GIs because the labor unions refused to allow workers to work more than 40 hours a week (Green, 86). With the public's belief in a growing communist threat, the regents had carte blanche to interrogate the four professors, in effect presiding over a *de facto* educational witch hunt. With only six of the 12 regents present, the electors voted to not "re-hire" the professors (86).

In the actual investigation of the University of Texas's economic professors, they were not allowed to take the stand to plead their cases. Stilwell, though, with Lefty reporting the hearing, allows the two economics not only to testify but to elucidate long-winded testimonies that poke fun at the questioning regents. In one exchange between a regent and Dr. Hatton the Dr. is asked:

"Dr. Hatton, are you a Bolshevik?"

The regent asking the question is believed to be a member of the Klan in *Campus Town*, but a questioning regent in the real-world scenario would have been a Texas Regular. Dr. Hatton responds, "Senator, are you a Klansman?" A furor erupts, but Stilwell has bridged the gap of the *Campus Town* Klan and their hunt for professor's with dissenting educational doctrines, and has linked them with the Texas Regular witch hunt, which went after liberal professors in Austin. Unfortunately, instead of fighting, the

professors of *Campus Town* walk away and let the Klan dictate educational policy. Austin, however, was a different circumstance. The firing of the four professors and the move by the regents to weaken the tenure system enraged Rainey, though he survived this first salvo of fire aimed at assassinating his presidency.

The year 1944 was a different story and Rainey's tenure as president was about to end. Stilwell enters this story through friendships with John Dos Passos, J. Frank Dobie, and Homer Rainey. John Dos Passos had been in south Texas fishing with Hart as Dos Passos wrote a series of articles for *Harper's* outlining the successes of the WPA and America's subsequent wartime economic rejuvenation. Stilwell described the trip as "doing some fishing, a lot of drinking, and etc." John Dos Passos, early in his career, was a staunch supporter of the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal, but eventually leaned right and became an outspoken critic of New Deal measures. Pegler was a supporter of Barry Goldwater in 1964, much to the chagrin of Hart. In a letter to Dobie dated June 10, 1944, Stilwell writes:

> I figure you can do more than anybody else in Texas to counteract the two things that are going to hurt Rainey most–the filthy literature charge, and the pro-C.I.O. charge. They'll believe you when they might not believe him. So here's wishing you luck when you take the stump...It is ironical to note that if Dos Passos were in Texas today he would be on the side of Coke Stevenson and the Regents. He has, like most people who make a change,

> swung a long way from his early radical ways. He even stoutly defended Pegler to me. But try and convince anybody of that.

And at the center of Rainey's current troubled presidency was, ironically, the younger, radical John Dos Passos's *The Big Money* of the *USA* Trilogy, which would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize the next year. In 1943, the University of Texas's English Department added the book onto the sophomore reading list. *The Big Money* outlined the United States as two countries: the rich and the poor. Dos Passos intimates, much like the New Deal, the sum of the country is better as a whole than a part. The writing is experimental and Norman Mailer claims that maybe outside of Mark Twain, Dos Passos succeeds writing in the American vernacular better than any other American author. Not surprisingly, the use of common "street" vernacular had the regents screaming the text was "obscene" and "perverted" and represented morals that the university did not stand for (Green, 87). The board wanted the person that placed the reading on the list fired. Since the reading list was compiled by a reading committee and voted for by the entire English faculty, no one professor was offered as an effigy (Keith, 93-96).

The move by the board to censor and question the integrity of the English department angered Rainey. On October 14, 1944, Rainey delivered an impassioned speech to the entire faculty denouncing the censorship and airing grievances he had been hiding from the general faculty for the previous four years. Lutcher Stark, a regent who had not been present at a meeting for the previous 11 months, made the motion to dismiss Rainey from his official duties as university president. On November 1, 1944, the regents fired Homer Rainey. The student body struck, and eight thousand students

marched through the streets of Austin in protest. Students carried signs vilifying the regents and pronouncing “Academic Freedom is Dead” (Green, 87). In *Campus Town* a candlelight vigil of a different kind is held outside of the home of Dr. Hatton, a fired economic professor, who routinely has crosses burning there rather than condolence candles.

The effects of the Rainey firing anecdotally are the impetus and inspiration behind *Campus Town*. The effects of the incident deeply affected Stilwell, but it also instilled his faith in J. Frank Dobie. Dobie stalwartly defended the English department and their choice of books. In a letter bordering on hero warship, Stilwell gushes:

> Thank God for a faculty member with the courage to say what all of them must know is the truth.
>
> I have just left the campus after spending three days there, and I came away convinced of one thing–the university will win if the faculty holds the line. But frankly, I am worried about the faculty holding it. Too many of them choose to see security in the form of pleasing the reactionary regents rather than in setting up definite principles which will give security to all faculty members, even those who happen to have ideas and who choose to express them. You can do much to hold the weak ones in line, and i want to express my appreciation to you. (Stilwell, Letter 11.17.1944)

This letter not only shows us how strongly this incident affected him, but it also gives us the biographical evidence that he was in Austin and witnessed the events first hand as he

wrote them through the eyes of Lefty Lester. But there may be different factors at work here too. There is strong circumstantial evidence that the Dr. Hatton of *Campus Town* is J. Frank Dobie. When we look at the circumstances of Dobie's University of Texas firing, there are a number of parallels between the novel and Dobie's biography. In Steven L. Davis's biography of Dobie, *A Liberated Mind,* he describes the scene the evening when word of Dobie's firing was handed down by the board of regents as:

> A torchlight procession of some two hundred students made its way across campus to the Dobie home. 'It was a great dash to get the house open, lights on, my hat off, and be, the two of us, on the side of the porch steps' to greet students, who were chanting 'We want Dobie!' (180)

The scene described by Davis is not far off the image struck by Dr. Hatton as the Klan burned a cross on his lawn and the president of State College, Dr. Clay, forced him to resign:

> The cross was burning, and Dr. Hatton stood in his favorite spot, on his front porch, watching. The picture made a deep impression on Lefty. The professor was a symbol of some kind–of defiance. A man such as Dr. Hatton could never be defeated. He and men like him would beat the Klan. The little professor was too tough for them. He did things the right way–no fist fighting. (Stilwell; *Uncovered* 256)

If we make the leap that, in fact, *Campus Town,* is an ode to J. Frank Dobie, then we realize the deep affectation Dobie and Bedichek and others had on the liberalizing of Stilwell's mind.

Hart, through the Rainey debacle, witnessed first hand how the establishment of Texas Oil, Business, and Politics could work to hold the "little" man down. What was it in his college years that happened to make him start his leftward political lean? After the hearings of Dr. Rose and Hatton, Lefty resigns from his position as Dr. Clay's chief marketer and informs Mike, the print foreman, he will join the union. We will see in *Border City* how Stilwell's ideas about unions are tested and forged under fire.

CHAPTER IV

IDEALISM TESTED: *BORDER CITY*

From the lessons learned by Lefty Lester in *Campus Town*, Hart had become a man of the people. Hart was a New Dealer to his soul and believed all men should be treated fairly and equally. In fact, he dedicates his first book, *Border City* to “the proposition that all men are created equal.” Stilwell, influenced by Dobie and Bedichek and other University of Texas professors, was a modern day liberal in a Texas wrought with conservative, communist hunting folk whose prevailing politicos believed in States rights and the worker’s right to work and not be subjugated to a union or strike. The political bosses of south Texas like, R.B. Creager and Jim Wells of Cameron County, worked hard to squash labor organization. To protect self-interests and their landowning constituents, the political bosses of south Texas, most owning large tracts of farm land and ranches, wanted to keep the flow of cheap “wetback” labor moving across the Rio Grande to work their fields and replace the able-bodied laborers who had gone off to fight in World War II. The working conditions for these undocumented laborers were deplorable and pay was even worse. In *Border City*, Hart succinctly captures and attacks the trials and tribulations the Texas-Mexican population faced in pre-war and early war time Valley culture.

The thinly hidden town depicted as Border City in the book by the same name is pre-World War II Brownsville, Texas. The town politicos and press are controlled by a one-man rule that is willing to go to any extreme to maintain control and votes for Cameron County. The book opens with the beautiful Chelo Moreno, ironically named after Americo Paredes's first wife, and her family pleading to the district attorney to help them after the Political Jefe, Billings, allegedly rapes her. The scene reflects the injustices and hand tying Texas-Mexicans encountered in the mid-twentieth century.

The pre-war forties of the lower Rio Grande Valley still clung to a patron/peon system. Most Texas-Mexicans who did not find refuge in the cities and remained in the 'bush' during the Mexican Revolution still worked in the orchards and as ranch hands. They operated essentially under a feudal serf system and the laborers found themselves indentured to their *patrons* by debt or by familial loyalties. Most families that were here illegally, or first generation legals, weathered unmentionable abuses and simply kept their opinions and mouths shut to protect the family from further scrutiny or deportation back to Mexico.[i] The young protagonist of the story is idealistic newspaperman Dave Atwood. The parallels between the life of Dave and the life of Hart are inescapable. Stilwell, like

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[i] Most of the information used in this section highlighting the societal and political times of 1920s to 1940s is obtained from Evan Anders's *Boss Rule is South Texas*, David Montejano's *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, and Arnoldo DeLeon's *They Called Them Greasers*. Secondary information comes from George Green's *The Establishment in Texas Politics* and Bryan Burrough's *The Big Rich*. Direct quote citations are parenthetically referenced in the line in which they are used.

Dave Atwood of *Border City,* starts his life in Brownsville as a cub reporter for the *Brownsville Herald.* Stilwell will eventually become the editor of the *Herald* and make the same editorial changes to the paper as Dave does in *Border City*. The characters of the fictitious newsroom of the *Border City News* pay homage to Stilwell's real-world friends, and the colleagues he worked with during the writing of *Border City*. For example, one sympathetic character and near mentor is the copydesk man, McWilliams. While Hart battled discrimination in the Texas republic, Cary McWilliams, editor of the *New Republic*, waged the battles of California. Stilwell wrote frequently in the same journals as McWilliams and was a political contributor to the *New Republic* in the 1940s. Another example and one of the most influential characters of *Border City* is Pepe. Pepe is the editor of the nightly edition of the News's Spanish language version of the *News*. Clearly the character is based on Mexican-American author, Americo Paredes, author of *George Washington Gomez,* who was the Spanish edition editor while Stilwell edited the *Herald* from 1942-1944. Years later, in interviews, Paredes rails against Stilwell and the character portrayed as Pepe. Paredes feels his character is painted as an angry, indignant young man–he feels Stilwell does not portray him in a favorable light.

Border City is the story of young, hard-drinking, womanizing, and idealistic Dave Atwood. A wayward newspaper reporter unafraid to face the political boss and machine of south Texas. The premise of *Border City* rests upon the discrimination Texas-Mexicans have to deal with on a daily basis on the border. The opening vignette finds Chelo Moreno raped and with nowhere to go for recompense. The rape occurs at the hands of a powerful politico, Jim Billings, who has the ear of the district attorney, the

loyalty of a half-Mexican, half-Anglo deputy sheriff, Enrique, and the support of the *Border City News*. Stilwell sets the tone of *Border City* to voice the outrages of discrimination the south Texas-Mexican faces, and the political forces that worked to squash labor unions. As Dave weaves his way through a quagmire of small town politics, he falls in love with the beautiful Chelo.

As Dave is educated, first by Tito, Chelo's older brother, and then by Pepe, a character based on Americo Paredes, of the horrors the Mexican-descended race faces, he swears to take Chelo away from the turmoil of the Rio Grande Valley and take her to a place where no one will care what color they are. Dave dreams of a place near Chicago where people will think Chelo is Italian, rather than Mexican. However, as the narrative unfolds we witness the death of Tito at the hands of Enrique, as a few grapefruit workers try to organize a union. Dave is also dragged into the world of the Mexican plight, when in the dark, there to report the gathering, is beaten by Enrique. Now imbrued in the "cause" to give the Mexican race a voice, Dave witnesses the travesty of discrimination from looks he and Chelo get at the local burger joint, a real-world situation Stilwell writes about in the *Parade,* to the couple forced to go to the movies at the Mexican theatre, rather than the white one, because Chelo could not go into the white theatre.

As Dave tries to convince Chelo to move, he is offered the editor's position at the *News*. The Old Man, the publisher in *Border City*, not the father of *Uncovered Wagon*, though, convinces him to stay and offers him full editorial control over the *News*. Stepping up to editor's position places Dave toe-to-toe with Billings, Border City political boss–Dave Atwood's greatest menace. Billings represents all that is bad with

Texas and he metaphorically represents the Anglo rape of the Texas-Mexican people that occurs in the opening scene, where Chelo's family is swearing affidavits concerning the circumstances of her rape in the home of Billings. Dave, newly appointed as editor of the *News,* is given assurances that he can make the editorial changes he sees fit to help the local Texas-Mexican population. His first active editorial policy change at the paper is to drop the red-scare enflaming, Pulitzer prize winning columnist, Westbrook Pegler from the paper. Dave, moreover, is given the opportunity to attack Billings when the time is nigh. Dave sees this as his chance to truly avenge Chelo against the horrible rape that occurs at the hands of Billings in the open pages of the story and loosen the stranglehold the political boss has on Border City. Dave Atwood, now as editor, has a voice, power and a conscience that is developed by Stilwell's alter-ego, Lefty Lester, in *Campus Town.*

Dave, in a final attempt to convince Chelo to “runaway” with him, meets her in a secluded apartment of a friend. Looking through the window and ready to report the couple to the political boss, Billings, is Enrique. When Enrique reports the news of the couple’s affair to Billings, the political machine threatens to deport Chelo back to Mexico if Dave does not retract a salacious news item linking Billings to the rape. Dave, the idealist he is, is given a choice to retract a news item he reports or face Chelo’s banishment, if you will, from Border City–he chooses to retain the news item and loose Chelo in favor of ethics.

The power and accuracy of *Border City,*though, is captured in the publication of the book. When Stilwell first submitted the manuscript to Doubleday and Doran, the original text was written as a non-fiction book. Stilwell, as we see in *Uncovered Wagon*

and *Campus Town* was not afraid to tackle real world headlines. In fact, he ripped his novels either right from his own life or from the pages which he edited. Doubleday returned the original manuscript and over a three year period made Stilwell rewrite the work into a novel. We can only assume Doubleday asked Stilwell to do this because of the criticism he levies against the Roosevelt administration's Office of Inter-American Affairs. The publication also may have been the impetus to force Stilwell to move to Austin. As Dave, the Stilwell alter-ego kept trying to convince Chelo to move north after his attack on Billings, Stilwell moved to Austin within weeks of publication. Did Stilwell know he was leaving for Austin and this was, in fact, an attack on the south Texas political machine or was the move to Austin merely coincidental? Stilwell's complexity makes these answers hard to find, but the temptation to wonder is too great.

Health care, sanitation, economy, and education were not deemed prerequisites for a Texas-Mexican during the period. Sadly, as illustrated in a tragic scene in which Chelo's brother Antonio is killed by a sheriff's deputy, the Texas-Mexican's first inclination was to call the priest for Last Rites before calling a doctor—if a doctor was summoned at all. The pre-war era was marked by Texas-Mexican ignorance and the white political bosses' abusive measures to ensure the Texas-Mexican population remained ignorant.

Commerce was just as stifling for Texas-Mexicans as was their prospects for education and a fair shot at the American dream. For the most part, the general population of the Valley region was predominately uneducated and unskilled Mexican laborers. The Texas-Mexicans were pawned by the Anglo ranchers and politicos to do

their dirty work in the fields or on the ranches. In a sense, the early twentieth century Mexican on the Texas border was little more than an indentured servant. Any move, or coordination, to organize into unions was squelched by a communist fearing Texas establishment and white population. During World War II, the denizens of the Rio Grande Valley feared Nazi intervention inside Mexico. Heightening border tensions before Pearl Harbor, Congressman Martin Dies of east Texas created the House Un-American Activities Committee to weed out and thwart Communist or Nazi sedition within the state. Stilwell illustrates this fear poignantly with the death of Antonio. Texas-Mexicans are beat and killed to stop them from forming a labor union. The formation of unions in the eyes of Dies and Texas Regulars was enough to be considered a communist activity.

Chelo's closest brother, the drunken, tuberculosis ridden Tito, lived through the conditions that sparked the 1938 Pecan-Shellers strike in San Antonio. His family, and he, claimed he contracted Tuberculosis by working in the damp, cold conditions that persisted in factories at the time of his employment. The Pecan-Shellers Union Strike was the first major pro-labor strike organized by Texas-Mexicans. However, 500 women and young men were arrested and placed in a jailhouse that was barely designed to fit sixty. Governor Allred, a liberal governor by Texas standards, interceded and stopped the strike. The impetus of Governor Allred's pro-labor stance paved the way for Conservative anti-union factions and candidates like "Pass the Biscuits" Pappy O'Daniel to take over Texas politics and create an establishment that still holds power today. Big Business and Oil now had a grasp and groups like the Texas Regulars, Christian Americans, and the Fight

for Free Enterprise were determined to quell any insurgency of pinko communists that may try to sell their brand of pro-labor organization in Texas.

On December 7, 1941, the day Roosevelt claimed “will live in infamy” the Texas-Mexicans joined their Anglo brothers and rose to the call to arms required to defend America. The border region changed and Texas-Mexicans fought valiantly alongside their Anglo buddies. As Texas-Mexican men left for the theater of war, their women filled home front jobs that were, before the war, off limits. They were allowed into different aspects of commerce that were traditionally reserved for Anglos. The flush of English speaking and moderately skilled workers into urban areas left a vacuum of labor in the fields. The vacuum brought with it a flush of illegal workers from Mexico. The workers were called “wetbacks” because they were still wet when ranchers and farmers picked them up for work. As Americo Paredes, Pepe in *Border City,* describes J. Frank Dobie as saying, “the Mexicans' backs were still wet because as soon as they swam across the river they took a nap. The backs of their shirts did not have time to dry.” Paredes's accusation of Dobie's assessment was the equivalent of Dobie overtly calling the Mexicans lazy and dumb in one sentence. "Didn't Dobie know," elucidated Paredes, "that the Mexicans took off their clothes to ford the river?" (Davis, 212)

The American and Mexican Governments, in efforts to stem the illegal workforce and protect a still depression ravaged American workforce, created the Bracero Program that would allow Mexican nationals to cross over and work legally in the United States. However, Texas was quickly blacklisted by the Mexican government and their citizens were not allowed to legally come to Texas because laborers' working conditions and pay were atrocious. Once again, a tide of illegal workers flooded the shores of the Rio

Grande and wages plummeted. A "wetback" could swim the Rio Grande and work for $. 35 cents a day and earn more than they could in their homeland. Texas wanted the cheap labor but had to find a way to convince the Mexican government that discrimination and injustice were actively being attacked to protect their citizens. Moreover, as the Texas-Mexicans returned home from war as decorated and revered heroes, the idea that they would quietly go back to the fields and to unskilled positions was a miscalculation on the parts of the Anglos that still controlled south Texas.

While Dave is actively changing the editorial policies of the *News,* the Governor's Mansion is getting a new resident, and the Texas Legislature under direction of the office the New Deal Office of Inter-American Affairs is instructed to form a commission to build better relations with Latin-American countries, especially Mexico, with its pool of valuable, but cheap, labor. In 1942, sitting Texas Governor 'Pappy' O'Daniel was vaulted to the US Senate with the help of the anti-labor factionists, the Texas Regulars. His Lieutenant Governor Coke Stevenson was elevated to Governor. Within the first six weeks of office, the Mexican Government blacklisted Texas from the Bracero Program. On urging from President Roosevelt and Congressman Lyndon Baines Johnson, Governor Stevenson passed the *House Concurrent Resolution, Number 105, The Caucasian Race Resolution*. The resolution mandated that all people of the Caucasian race could not be discriminated against. The Texas-Mexicans fell under this protection. However, actuality is not reality. Abuses and injustices continued to occur on a daily basis. The war effort was raging and Texas producers, farmers, and ranchers were happy with their status quo of low wage earners and a small, illegal and undocumented work force. The unskilled "wetback" tide was cheap and efficient. Employees did not have to

pay if the funds were not there and immigration employees were informed not to arrest a "wetback" unless they broke the law or were found walking the streets.

Roosevelt, still concerned with the repercussions of the Depression and needing to feed, arm, and clothe his troops, instructed Stevenson to form a Texas Commission that would be overseen by the Office of Inter-American Affairs. On September 4, 1943, Stevenson signed the proclamation that formed the Texas Good Neighbor Policy which would in effect "give full and equal accommodations, advantages, and privileges of all public places of business and amusement to Mexicans and other Latin-American residing or visiting the state" (Kingerea).

The prevailing attitude of most in the upper reaches of the Texas establishment thought the Good Neighbor Commission was a laughable jest. Dave Atwood felt the same. The Governor, a character who remains faceless and nameless in *Border City,* had to be Stevenson. The commission in the book was no mystery as it shared the same name as the real life commission. However, the advent of the International Goodwill Ball in *Border City* allowed Hart to set the stage for the farce he felt was the Good Neighbor Commission. Chelo, as Dave's date, is given the cold shoulder due to her skin color; she is not allowed, under normal circumstances, to be in the hotel. Dave laments the discrimination. He recognizes the duplicity of the Good Neighbor Policy and sees it as a means for the heads of state to pat each other on the back and congratulate each other, rather than find hard-tack, specific solutions to Mexican labor issues.

In real life, the Good Neighbor Commission focused primarily on education. Education was never entered into the establishment's vision of what the Good Neighbor Commission was to address. As the commission grew and matured, the University of

Texas Board of Regents attacked the freedoms of education by firing then President Homer Rainey and four economics professors—a subject Stilwell tackles in *Campus Town*. The Good Neighbor Commission was misnamed and fell short of its true identity, the Feel Good Commission.

Stilwell's use of the daily headlines he edited at the *Herald* and his first hand accounts of the dangers facing the Mexican race deeply affected Stilwell. Although the matter is almost entirely conjecture, he leaves Brownsville and political reporting shortly after the release of *Border City.* He moves to Mexico City to write *Fishing in Mexico*, and once back in the States, he moves to Austin, never to return to the Valley to live. Was Stilwell forced from the Valley? Did he attack the political machine as his alter-ego Dave Atwood does? We do know that *Border City* was not well received by critics, but was the message to stop discrimination against the Mexican race effectively delivered?

CHAPTER V

IDEALISM DEFEATED

The culmination of Stilwell's experiences in his autobiographical trilogy, *Uncovered Wagon*, *Campus Town*, and *Border City*, leaves the reader and Hart in *Border City* lamenting the loss of Atwood's beloved Chelo and the crushing of Stilwell's idealistic view of the world. Censored and emotionally downtrodden by the *Border City* political machine Hart leaves the reader wondering what is next for young Dave Atwood. We would hope he'd run to Mexico to be with his lover or stand up to the south Texas political machine as he intimates. The only inclination, if we look at the traces of Hart's life in his fiction, is to follow the career path of Stilwell's life after he leaves the *Brownsville Herald* in 1944, to see where the young Billy Endicott, Lefty Lester, or Dave Atwood stories end.

The fictional, autobiographical life of Stilwell is lost after he leaves the *Herald*, because he never writes a novel again. From his journalistic endeavors and non-fiction works, *Hunting and Fishing in Texas* and *Fishing in Mexico*, however, we can almost write a daily picture of Stilwell's life. After leaving the *Herald*, Stilwell is contracted by Alfred A. Knopf to write *Fishing in Mexico*. He moves to Mexico City to use it as his headquarters while he travels the country to write what is still considered the definitive text on fishing in Mexico. While he works on the book and travels Mexico with a litany

of American expatriates, Stilwell contributes tomes of articles to *Field & Stream*, *Outdoor Life*, and *Sports Afield* about his adventures, and it is from these articles we can paint an accurate linear timeline of the man's life. In all, between 1938 and his death in 1972, Stilwell published, by my estimates, over 1,200 journalistic essays, as well as a weekly column from 1967 to 1971.

Stilwell's shift from political journalistic activism to outdoors journalism is a telling circumstance of the failures of his idealism, rather, better said, his failure in his faith in idealism. Since he left no journals, we can only assume that the stories he shares in *Border City* reflects his lose of faith in the political process and the notion of the press's freedom to speak and report the truth. Stilwell did continue to dabble in political measures from the peripheries, most notably reporting for the *Austin-American Statesman*; the *Texas Spectator*, forerunner of the *Texas Observer*; working to raise money for first the Texas Wild Game and Oyster Commission and then Texas Parks and Wildlife; and ending his political forays with a losing attempt to win seat seven of the Houston Independent School Board.

It is possible that it was a factor of his idealism or his overt liberalism that delegated his political writing in his later days to the more liberal minded Texas publications, rather than the national stage. He had either lost faith in the national political media or it lost faith in him. After the appearance of *Campus Town* in 1951, we no longer see him writing essays for national political publications, such as *New Republic, The Nation* and *National Review*. We can make a few simple, general assumptions that after World War II, with Mexican-American men returning home heroes

and their women now skilled and working in the better paying jobs than pre-war times, Hart no longer had a platform. Mexican-Americans had united and were fighting for their own civil rights. Moreover, with U.S. Governmental efforts like the Bracero Program and the Good Neighbor Commission showing some signs of making headway for equal rights for Mexican-Americans the national media may have felt that Hart's political journalism had run its course. (Anders, *South*; DeLeon, *Greasers*; Kingerea, *History*; Montejano, *Anglos*) The reason may even be as simple as the fact that when Stilwell left the Valley for Austin he no longer on the front lines of the issue.

Regardless of Stilwell's reasons for abandoning Mexican-American labor and immigration issues, Stilwell, in quick succession, publishes *Fishing in Mexico* in 1950; *Campus Town* in 1951; and *Old Soggy Bottom, No. 1* and *Hunting and Fishing in Texas* in 1952. *Fishing in Mexico* and *Hunting and Fishing in Texas* are straightforward reports of the hunting and fishing venues of their respective locales. *Old Soggy Bottom, No. 1*, though, although not his best-selling book and definitely the least autobiographical, is the story of Floyd "Slats" Rodgers, the builder of Texas's first airplane. *Old Soggy Bottom* is Slats biography as told to Hart. The story is a history of Texas aviation and a great "mobster" tale. We get an intense narrative of the history of prohibition and the seedy, rebellious pilots that turned Dallas's Love Field into a stunt flying haven that kept Texas drinkers well lubricated with illicitly obtained and brewed "moonshine." (Stilwell)

We do know from correspondence with Americo Paredes and Frank Dobie that after Mexico City Stilwell moved to Austin, where correspondence between Stilwell and Paredes and Dobie thins significantly. The period, though, represents a time that all three

authors were in the same area and most likely meet, at least Stilwell and Dobie, on a fairly frequent basis. We can make this assertion on the fact that after Stilwell moves to Houston in 1958, the breadth of correspondence increases and the letters become more intimate and knowledgeable of each man's personal life.

The impetus of Stilwell's move to Houston, however is unclear, even to his grandson, Benjamin Acosta-Hughes. We can, though, infer that the move may have come with the marriage to his second wife, Anne Stilwell, who was a lifelong educator. Ann's primary professional focus was as a school social worker for abused children. She and Stilwell co-wrote *A Child Who Walks Alone*, published in 1972. The book explores the affects of physical abuse on small children and the coping mechanisms they employ to survive their tormented childhoods. As Stilwell elucidates in an *Austin-American Statesman* interview, his contribution to the book was only "to organize and get it to print." (Statesman) Ironically, when searched on the most common academic databases, *A Child Who Walks Alone* is more commonly referenced than any of Stilwell's personal endeavors. Additionally while in Houston, Stilwell wrote *Looking into Man's Past*, a short children's book on the anthropological history of man, and a column called "Texas Trails" for the *Houston Chronicle*. The column was an outdoors editorial piece where Stilwell outlined most of the conservation ideas we witness taking shape in the last sections of *Glory of the Silver King*. “Texas Trails” ran from 1962 until 1968, when he and Ann Stilwell returned to Austin.

Hart’s correspondence collected in others archives is the greatest breadth of information we can obtain on him, since he apparently kept none of the correspondence

he received. Stilwell's papers at the Witliff Collection are scant at best; however, his grandson and granddaughter are providing me with other papers their mother, Mary Gray Hughes, had saved after Hart's death and has passed on to them. The biographer's hope is that these papers provide a greater level of understanding of whom Stilwell was involved with on a personal basis and provide other leads to track down to complete his biography.

Winton Porterfield, son of *Texas Observer* writer and the first recipient of the Dobie Paisano Ranch Writer's Fellowship, Billy Porterfield, has agreed to share some of the saved correspondence and pictures they have of Hart. During the sixties in Austin, Billy Porterfield and Stilwell forged a strong relationship; in fact, the ties between the Porterfield and Stilwell families apparently ran deep. Stilwell's daughter, Mary Gray-Hughes, writes in the introduction of Billy Porterfield's *Diddy Waw Diddy:* "Move over Twain, Saroyan and all you others and welcome Billy Porterfield with his rollicking, life-loving, touching book." Hart and Anne spent a lot of time around the Porterfield children. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, no further information is available.

The ornery, cantankerous cuss we find who has now become like the Old Man of *Uncovered Wagon* is captured best in a picture taken three weeks before Stilwell's death by Russell Lee. The picture provides us a simple, but telling tale of the old man Hart Stilwell had become. Hart is reclined in a beaten leather chair with a tumbler of scotch in his right hand that his grandson, Benjamin Acosta-Hughes, says was never far away. A burning cigarette waves in the left hand while Hart speaks to someone out of frame. Here is Stilwell at his most intimate and relaxed. Here is the man that A.C. Greene accuses of

taking off all his clothes and sitting stark naked in the middle of the room until the crowd silenced and allowed him to make his point. This is the Hart Stilwell who at seven-year-old Winton Porterfield's birthday party stripped down to his birthday best and serenaded a room full of stunned youngsters. This is the Hart we can see as Dave Atwood in *Border City* waving a piece of copy written by Westbrook Pegler and screaming, "Why is this in our editorial content." But in the picture Hart, with his lankiness, is all angles and sharp-edges, and appears to glance out of the corner of his eye looking toward the camera lens. That is the Hart I have come to love. He appears to be doing one thing, but slyly playing a deceiving hand of Three Card Monte with the viewer. Hart pontificating out of one side of his face yet making sure the entire congregation hears what he has to say, teaching us a few things along the way and entertaining us all the while.

CHAPTER VI

FINDING HART

An early evening red harvest moon rose in the mouth of the harbor. A landscapist, with easel and palette, could not have centered the large smiling face of the moon more precisely than Mother Nature was doing at that moment. It was late October, and the first light norther of the season rolled in with a sea mist obscuring the brilliant white dunes of South Padre Island that glisten across the water of the lower Laguna Madre on most clear evenings. The norther brought with it a feeling of change that accompanies late fall in deep, south Texas.

In a Rio Grande Valley fall, white-wing dove are more often found on grills than in the air; buck whitetail are shedding summer velvet in preparation for the mid-winter rut to come; flounder and redfish are exiting the bays to the gulf, in mass, to spawn and continue the fragile circle of life; and flocks of Redhead, Widgeon, and Blue- and Green-Winged Teal that spend the winter dodging .20 gauge shotgun blasts and roiling in the relative warmth of the winter Laguna Madre are flying in from the north in colorful waves of late fall plumage.

Steve Lightfoot, editor of *Texas Sporting Journal*, Kenny Redin, the journal's graphics and advertising guru, and Aaron Reed, trying to raise awareness of

environmental conservation issues along the coast by kayaking the length of the Texas coast, all sat on the rear deck of my family's hunting and fishing lodge with my dad and me enjoying the view of Port Mansfield harbor and the Gulf of Mexico beyond.

Dad and I, in the middle of a hard season of guiding, like the season and wildlife around us, were in a transition, too. The winter operation at Getaway Adventures Lodge shifts from pure fishing excursions to a combination of winged hunts, deer hunts, or even the odd excursion stalking the exotic Nilgai, a beast imported by the King's and Kenedy's to find a cheaper, heartier alternative to cattle.

The cooler, easier days of hunting and getting on the water later than 4:30 a.m. would add a few extra pounds to our frames, which we had lost from the heat of summer and the stress of hard hours under a blazing sub-tropical sun. The extra weight would serve us well for the winter to come. Wintertime in the lower Laguna Madre is "trophy" speckled trout time. In the gray, frigid, misty south Texas winters, trophy trout are a tarpon aficionado's wintertime release. Although the work as a guide is hard, punishing, and not one of the better paying endeavors a man can undertake, it is something that runs in the blood–my blood. I'm in my early thirties, but the strength of the Texas sun has etched itself in the corners of my eyes and on the back of my hands. I can read the water, weather, and waves like one of the novels that lays in my boat's console. My lullaby, as a child, was the hum of the wind whistling through the taut strings of well-strung rods and the call of gulls and curlews digging for their dinner.

As I glance at the subtle lit faces of the men around me, I feel a connection in the reverence each pays to the view rising in the mouth of the harbor. Their blood, my blood, rises and ebbs with the tides that flush and cleanse the flats.

Between Steve, Kenny, and my dad, we represent a part of a Texas heritage that, in this age of instant gratification and greed, cannot be lost. And as emerging voices of Texas wildlife conservation and outdoor journalism, Aaron and I are responsible for carrying these stories and mores and lifestyle on like these men that came before us and those that came before them.

As the moon's largesse shrunk in its rising trajectory, the elder statesmen, tongues loosened by a few Coronas and Don Julio, were in a yarn-telling mood. Aaron and I listened to the soft drone of wisdom and knowledge that floated on the cool air, and absorbed our coast's past.

"Bubby Brister was an icon," Steve said. "He's one of the original voices of the Texas outdoors."

"You know, Steve," my father said, "Bubby taught me how to hunt Sandhill and ducks off Wallisville Road in Houston back when it was nothing but a mere gravel road out into the pine woods."

That revelation, that simple statement, "back when," says it all for the outdoorsman. Each subsequent generation gets the previous generation's "leftovers," because things "back when" were better, and the seas, lakes, and rivers teemed with fish and the woods with varmint and bigger game. What the newer generation inherits is a sea assaulted by more anglers and better fishing equipment and faster boats and fewer fish.

Bubby Brister, long time outdoor columnist for the *Houston Chronicle*, had befriended my paternal grandfather, an Ozark Mountains, backwoods country boy from Arkansas. They'd fish and hunt long hours together, while my dad listened and absorbed their stories.

As my dad grew older, he had me tagging along on hunts and fishing trips and absorbing conversations about the ever-better "back when." On other occasions, I'd sit on the front porch stoop learning boat knots or some other boy scout arcana, while Pawpaw and my dad shared stories about Bubby and trips along an old single-lane, gravel-paved road down south to a foreign place called Arroyo City. The roll of the rs and the soft landing of the yo felt exotic and dangerous on my tongue.

It was also the first time I heard the name Hart Stilwell in conversation. Maybe it was the "Hart" that caught my attention. It wasn't common. It wasn't the odd effeminate names like Lesley and Connie and Allison I heard when male, East Texas family members came around for free Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners.

No. Hart, to a child, was the personification of that beating orb in your chest that dad always screamed to have a lot more of from the sidelines, when I stepped to home-plate or climbed onto the swim blocks.

As Steve and dad and Kenny traded Brister stories, Aaron and I turned our conversation to the tarpon season that was quickly coming to a close with the encroaching, cooling weather. In the background, the words tarpon and Stilwell spilled out of the conversation in conflicting and competing messages. I tried to follow Aaron's story about his Port A tarpon, while I overheard Steve telling dad about a lost manuscript.

“What,” I asked, holding a hand in Aaron’s direction to halt his fish tale. “What manuscript?”

“Well,” Steve said, “we’re doing another edition of Hart Stilwell’s *Hunting and Fishing in Texas*, and as we dug through Stilwell’s archives at the Wittliff Collections, we came across an unpublished manuscript.”

“What’s the manuscript named,” my dad asked.

Steve leaned forward. You could read the excitement on his face, and he suddenly looked uncomfortable, wringing his hands one moment, putting them in his lap the next, and finally lacing the fingers while pointing with the index digits. “*Glory of the Silver King*,” he said.

Steve commenced to melt back into the wooden Adirondack deck chair that supported his Texas-sized six-foot-three frame. It was if he had unleashed the secrets of the Zapruder film and revealed to us the conspirators of JFK’s assassination, and the weight of the unveiled truth left him visibly lighter. He looked around, meeting us each eye to eye, with a wry, dimpled grin smiling back into the ever-chilling evening.

For anyone who has battled a silver king, you can easily excuse Steve's enthusiasm. Tarpon hold, damn even command, a special place in an angler's heart. The dramatic runs. The dogged persistence to not give up before the angler. The gravity-defying leaps. The "nice sound" of rattling gills that Hart describes. They are uniquely tarpon.

It's why when inexplicably the damn fish simply spits the hook and swims away after a two hour battle, your forearms burning, your fingers curling into a fist from the

constant pressure applied to hold the rod, and body drenched with sweat, we cast right back into the fray.

It's why we travel eight hours through exotic back rivers like the Tamesi and Panuco and Monkey or through the Nicaraguan rainforest braving children-stealing sized mosquitoes and Jesus Christ Lizards and Fer-de-lance snakes to get a peek at a silver flash of rolling tarpon.

It's a fever.

It's sleeping uncomfortably through a sticky rainforest night to the tune of a million buzzing mosquitoes accompanied by the do-wop of the Howler monkey.

It's *TARPON*.

The only other words in the angler's lexicon that can even begin to challenge the word tarpon is "fish on!"

“So,” I said, barely able to contain my growing excitement, “besides being about tarpon, what’s it about?”

Steve stretched out his size thirteen Crocks, those god awful fishing shoes that seemed to be all the rage a few years ago, and laced his fingers, like they suddenly had a purpose, across his stomach. Self-consciously he would stroke the gray hairs of his goatee every few seconds.

“The manuscript needs a lot of work,” he sighed. “But it’s basically a history of tarpon and snook fishing on the Texas coast and northeast Mexico.”

“Can I read it,” I asked.

“Sure, I don’t have a copy here, but I’ll send you one once I get back to the office.”

As a die-hard tarpon aficionado, I couldn't wait to get my hands on a copy of the manuscript, or the finished book, which Steve said a group of investors was interested in publishing .

If fate hadn't intervened a couple of years earlier, I would have never seen either.

Previous to that 2002 evening conversation about *Glory of the Silver King*, a disturbing trend was beginning to reveal itself in the gill net surveys that TPW uses to monitor the health of Texas estuarine fisheries. As an ardent "trophy" trout angler and one with a vested family interest in my home waters, I involved myself with the media and TPW to develop a grassroots campaign to lower the limits on the speckled trout take in the lower Laguna Madre.

The liberal catch limits of 10 fish per angler per day combined with an increase in angling pressure were taking a toll on the trout's spawning stock biomass, a fancy way of saying the fish available for spawn. The pressure was decimating our bay's stock. Over the previous ten year span, Dad, our guide staff, and other concerned anglers began witnessing smaller and smaller fish and fewer numbers of "keeper" fish with each passing year. The lower Laguna Madre appeared to be heading toward a "back when" fishery. Although the situation was not a "fishery in collapse," as then lower Laguna Madre TPW Ecosystem Leader, Randy Blankinship, assured everyone it wasn't, the situation was tenuous and a devastating winter freeze would have permanently damaged the trout population in the lower Laguna Madre to an extent TPW would have to shut down trout fishing all together.

To thwart a "no fishing" zone in my Mother Lagoon, I launched the trout campaign in 2002, and I instantly received interest from the national press over the regional pieces I was writing for Texas outdoor magazines. At the time, I was frequently appearing in *Gulf Coast Connections*, a tiny rag of a newspaper with a small, but rabid readership; David Samms's, *Lonestar Outdoor News*; *Shallow Water Angler*, a large, slick, national publication that highlighted inshore flats fishing; and a couple of Texas newspapers.

Steve, from *Texas Sporting Journal*, called one day and asked if I wanted to cover the trout situation in the lower Laguna Madre.

"Sure," I said. "I'd love the opportunity."

"We can only pay you a couple of hundred bucks," Steve said. "If that's okay with you, of course."

"I tell you what, Steve: a couple of hundred bucks and throw in that manuscript we talked about when you were down with Aaron, and we're on."

"What manuscript," he said.

"The one about tarpon and snook by Stilwell."

"Oh! Oh, yeah," he said. "Done."

I went to work on the article and campaign. I called Dr. Larry McKinney, Head of TPW Coastal Fisheries, and Robin Riechers, TPW Fisheries Economist and Policy Specialist, to get quotes and scientific data concerning the speckled trout in the lower Laguna Madre. These phone calls and emails eventually lead to great personal and working relationships with two of the more progressive fisheries managers TPW has seen.

I worked on the trout article, my first opus, for a couple of days when "it" came. The it, the manuscript, arrived in a beat up, blue and white, one-price, USPS box. I tore off the perforated strip and revealed the splendor of the *Glory of the Silver King* within.

I put the trout article and campaign aside for a day, and I dove into the story and history of Texas tarpon and snook fishing. I was riveted. Hart knew the fever: he was infected. He captures the mystique of the tarpon. I could see the battles with the silver king as he wrote. I plugged through the book and eventually got back to my article and trout campaign. I worked the phone to legislatures, other captains, environmental groups, chambers of commerce, and anyone who would listen to the plight of the lower Laguna Madre speckled sea trout.

A year of lobbying, writing articles, and traveling to numerous TPW public comment meetings finally paid off on a cold and blustery Austin, Texas, February day. Dr. McKinney sat at the head of the table before the TPW Board of Commissioners and worked with diligence and purpose through the entire coastal fisheries agenda.

Coincidently, one of the agenda items, beside my belabored sea trout, was the issue of lifting the ban on Texans' rights to keep one tarpon per year. Historically anglers could keep a tarpon for trophy reasons only if they purchased a game tag from TPW. The agenda item explored a petition for regulation change to allow anglers to keep one tarpon over 87 inches, if caught, to challenge the 65-year-old Texas record.

As Dr. McKinney argued for raising the moratorium of killing tarpon for sport without a trophy tag, he mentioned to the commissioners that a few TPW employees had a manuscript in their possession called the *Glory of the Silver King* by Hart Stilwell. Dr.

McKinney wanted to see the book in print due to its historical perspective on Texas fisheries and the slice of Texana it provided for those interested in that sort of thing.

After a short conversation about *Glory of the Silver King*, the commission agenda proceeded, and the sea trout item came before the commissioners. As quick as it was raised, Chairman Peter Holt, principle owner of the San Antonio Spurs, asked if members of the commission knew any reason why the speckled trout limits in the lower Laguna Madre should not be lowered. Unanimously the commission passed the measure to lower the limits and effectively saved the speckled sea trout population in the lower Laguna Madre.

As elated as I was to win my first environmental conservation campaign, burning in the background, though, was that name and manuscript again; it was as if Hart Stilwell and *Glory of the Silver King* were calling to me. In a sense I guess they were.

Flash forward a year or two. I found myself employed as a public high school teacher in deep south Texas in Hart's old stomping grounds of the lower Rio Grande River Valley. Much like Hart, I tend to lean a little to the left of the political spectrum, which is always to the chagrins of our cantankerous and conservative fathers. I thought, like Hart's thinly veiled autobiographical Dave Atwood did in *Border City*, Stilwell's anti-Mexican discrimination polemic, that I could make a difference in the lives of the under-privileged folk of south Texas. Unfortunately, like Hart, I too learned that idealism is lost to the harsh realities of the poverty-stricken Rio Grande Valley.

My intellectual curiosity and growing national writing popularity from the success of the trout campaign, mixed with a healthy dose of disillusionment with the public education system, lead me to seek an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas - Pan American. I entered the program with the express purpose of learning how to write biography, Hart's biography.

The writing program, new and not necessarily literary, left me wanting. As I waded through a few bland and shallow classes, I did, however, have one of those eureka moments as I read the syllabus of my Tuesday night American Literature Special Topics class.

The Beats.

Like most east coast educated, upper middle-class WASP males, I spent one summer backpacking the Rockies with a beat up copy of Kerouac's *On the Road* peaking out of a backpack compartment or pocket. I had read most of Kerouac's canon and Allen Ginsburg's environmental poetry had shaped a lot of my early 20s mindset toward nuclear anti-proliferation. Like many from my generation, it was the Beats that first sparked my interest in environmentalism.

The instructor, Dr. Robert Earl Johnson, Jr., a name more aptly attached to a presidential assassin than a preeminent Beat scholar, is an expert on William S. Burroughs's time spent in the lower Rio Grande Valley. I was familiar with Burroughs's work. I'd read *Naked Lunch*. I thought it was one of the funniest things I'd ever read, but I had no idea of the depth of autobiographical pretext the novel contained.

Johnson's *The Lost Years of William S. Burroughs* follows and defines the pre-writing life of Burroughs. The text exhaustively explains the history of the Rio Grande Valley Burroughs had escaped to while running from a New Orleans District Attorney hellbent on placing him in jail for a minor narcotics violation. Johnson made the autobiographical content of Burroughs's fiction jump off the page.

In one Tuesday evening class, discussing the political and social make-up of 1940s south Texas, Dr. Johnson dropped the name again–Hart Stilwell.

This was the first time I had met someone outside of hunting and fishing circles that knew who Stilwell was. In fact, Johnson and I came to Stilwell from two different avenues–Johnson purely from the academic side, and me from the outdoor writing side.

We high jacked the class and spent most of the evening talking about Stilwell's life and writing. I had no idea that Stilwell was a minor, national political activist for Mexican-American Labor issues, and Johnson had only a vague idea of the depth of Stilwell's outdoor writing career.

A quick and lasting friendship commenced, and Johnson set to work mentoring me. He persuaded me to move from the creative writing program to the literature program where I was mentored by the likes of blue-collar novelist Eric Miles Williamson and a misplaced man of the Enlightenment, Donald Newman. In these three, I found my triumvirate of inspiration, intellectual challengers, and kindred spirits. From Johnson, I learned what it takes to be not only a writer, but a literary sleuth, a skill that will serve me well with Stilwell's biography. I learned not to let any lead remain unturned and not to let any reference go untraced. Williamson taught me how to put two words together that

would sometimes make sense. Newman, in the immortal sigh of Seinfeld's "Newman," at once my nemesis and always my writing's best friend, taught me how to revise, revise, and then revise again.

The day Michael Jackson died, over drinks to "discuss" my thesis at the local Logan's Steakhouse, Johnson asked me how the Stilwell research was going. "Great," I said. However, as I said it, I also knew that the research was not going as well as hoped. As Stilwell says in *Glory of the Silver King*, "I collect memories, not things."

Stilwell, one of the most prolific outdoor writers of the twentieth century with over 250 articles in *Field & Stream*, 200 in *Sports Afield*, 150 in *Outdoor Life*, and numerous articles in magazines such as *Esquire*, *Parade*, *True*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, editor of the *Brownsville Herald*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Texas Observer*, syndicated columnist, and *New York Times* outdoor writer, was without a single saved personal journal and sparsely saved correspondence.

"Well, actually Dr. Johnson," I confessed, "it's not going as great as it could. This guy left no journals, few letters, and most of his publishers have either trashed his author files or no longer know who he is. I think I'm really at a crossroads here. How do I write a biography of a man that left so little?"

Since I uttered those words, I've learned from my naivety, Stilwell actually left a great written record of his life; it's smattered throughout his fictional and non-fictional works. That conversation and book, however, is still brewing for another day, but Johnson made a brilliant suggestion: "What about that lost manuscript you keep telling me about? The one about tarpon?"

The shot of Don Julio present the night I first heard Steve Lightfoot mention *Glory of the Silver King* seemed to cross the cosmos of six years and find itself deposited in the fresh glass of Don Julio sitting in front of me. Was *Glory of the Silver King* really seeking me to get it out to the world?

"You know, you *are* the modern day Stilwell," Johnson said.

Sweating a deadline for *Outdoor Life* about the Texas Parks and Wildlife's Sharelunker Program but wasting time drinking Don Julio and talking about the Beats and Stilwell in south Texas somehow awakened me to the fact: Yeah, I may be the modern Hart Stilwell. I convinced myself that, yes, maybe I was the perfect voice to get *Glory of the Silver King* edited and in print. Stilwell and I are both from the lower Rio Grande Valley. We are both Texas liberals, a kind of left leaning conservative in the rest of the country. We both took a stance on estuarine environmental activism. We also, albeit separated by a half century, write for a number of the same publications.

Leon Edel, in *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* calls this little transgression of sharing the biographer's and subject's life experiences "transference." He also, however, admits that all great biographers should empathize with the subject and get into their minds and lives, without, of course, losing sight of biography versus autobiography. But, before I could transfer any life experiences between Stilwell and myself, I had to obtain permission from a daunting list of people that held the fate of *Glory of the Silver King* in their hands.

"Steve, Brandon. What's up, man?"

"B, how you doing," Steve greeted me. "Great piece on sun protection for *TSJ* last month. Good work."

"Well, congratulations to you, man, on winning the Texas Outdoor Writers Association's Lifetime Achievement Award." Steve, in the humble way only big men without a life's fear for personal safety can do, thanked me.

"Steve, remember *Glory of the Silver King*?"

"Yeah, yeah. Stilwell's manuscript. What about it?"

"Are you guys still trying to get it to print?"

"No man. Kenny gave up, Aaron is on to other things, and personally, I think it'd take to much work to get it into a publishable form."

"Really? Do you mind if I take a shot?"

"No, man. Actually, I think you'd be the perfect person to do it."

First permission gathered, one more to go, and still a publisher to find.

"Ben?" Ben Acosta-Hughes is Stilwell's grandson. "Hey, Brandon Shuler from Port Mansfield."

"Hey, how's my grandfather's biography coming?"

"Let's say it's a work in progress, but it's moving along."

"Good, good. I still need to get you a few of those photos of my grandfather I promised."

"I'd appreciate that Ben, thanks.

"Actually, Ben, the reason I'm calling I spoke with Steve Lightfoot today. I think you gave him permission a few years ago to get one of your grandfather's books into publication: *Glory of the Silver King*."

"Yeah, I did, but he never got back to me."

"Well, I asked if he minded if I took the ball and ran with it. Could this be something that'd interest your family?"

"Sure, have fun with it. Let me know if there is anything I can help you with."

There it was. I had the ball. I had the permission. But I did not have a publisher or the copies of the manuscripts. I thought the quickest and easiest part of the journey was to get the manuscript first and see if Steve's assessment of a challenging piecing together held true.

It did.

The Wittliff collections at Texas State University are a vast and veritable treasure trove of Texana writers and luminaries. Steven Davis, assistant archival curator and great guy, also author of *Texas Literary Outlaws* and a new biography, *The Liberated Mind: J. Frank Dobie*, held my hand through my first archival experience.

He lead me through the etiquette and responsibility of digging through these old letters and manuscripts and what I could and could not do. He offered me a seat, and he told me his assistant would bring out the collection in a few minutes.

I sat in the old rickety, wooden-back seat in a tiny carrel. The confined space conjured in me the feelings a prisoner-student in Leavenworth might feel.

A tiny rap at the door, and there they were. Three acid-free manila boxes containing multiple drafts of two unfinished book manuscripts, a handful of old magazine and newspaper clippings, and a few "lost" photographs by famed Texas photographer Russell Lee.

I went straight to the four drafts of *Glory of the Silver King*. Steve Lightfoot's assessment was correct; my job was going to be to take a collection of yellowed, coffee-stained scribbles and cross-outs and type-overs that still smelled faintly of smoke and nicotine and put them into publishable form. But like the lure of the tarpon that called Stilwell and me to travel the length of the Gulf and Central America, the desire to get this manuscript together and into print was overwhelming.

As I read through the four drafts, focusing my attention on the most complete version, the original pull and excitement with which I first read *Glory of the Silver King* returned. I was no longer only a fishing guide. The long hours I'd spent earning my MA in Literature and reading 17th century satire, literary theory, Post-Colonial literature, and a smattering of literary genres forced me to read the text with a rejuvenated verve and new eye for literary detail. In my hands, I realized I held something special. Something that not only fishermen and outdoorsmen would enjoy, but readers who valued history and, particularly, lost portions of Texas coastal outdoors history.

My task had begun.

Glory of the Silver King was, much as the tarpon, a difficult catch to land and bring to the boat, if you will. The manuscript, which exists in four varying levels of

completion, is disjointed and a fair enigma to decipher. Stilwell made a number of starts and stops in the writing and shifted content from chapter to chapter as he wrote, making the task of editing his narrative intent difficult. His shifts from point to point made the narrative flow between the four manuscripts a challenge to decipher and piece together at times.

The Witliff Collection only houses three of the four manuscripts, and two of these manuscripts were crammed into the same small, acid-free folders, without cohesive order. The fourth, and most complete manuscript from which most of this version of *Glory of the Silver King* originates, I obtained from Stilwell's grandson, Benjamin Acosta-Hughes. The pagination of each document varied wildly as Stilwell worked to put the narrative into a sequence that shifted the point of view from the fishing tale toward a polemic against overfishing of the tarpon and exploitation of our natural resources.

Stilwell's career as a journalist and magazine writer added the additional dynamic of short, choppy paragraphs to his writing style. Where this type of writing is indicative of news-style, hard-boiled writing, it also appears that Stilwell used these short paragraphs to build his writing process. Stilwell essentially worked from a basic narrative outline outward to the full textual prose represented in the fourth draft. The first two manuscripts are composed of short one to two sentence paragraphs and contains an overwhelming use of dashes and fragments–almost as if he was simply getting the idea on paper, which is most likely the tactic he was employing. Each subsequent draft fleshed out the ideas in varying levels of detail and completion, until the fourth draft that

was hastily put together and sent to Alfred A. Knopf by his wife, Ann Stilwell, after his death in 1975.

The original manuscripts' writing and short paragraphs created a unique and challenging editing experience. To ease the prose's readability and save white space on the printed page, I condensed the original short sentences into one extended narrative paragraph. For example, the prologue, "And in the Beginning...," originally read:

> The year was 1934 and it was not a very good year. It was the depth of the Big Depression...the year was lousy.
>
> I was standing on the flat, sandy bank of the Rio Grande near its mouth. The Rio Grande flowed into the Gulf of Mexico then. It does now–on those rare occasions when it flows. Much of the the same water moves back and forth with the tides. Occasionally a sandbar forms across the mouth, then the river is landlocked.
>
> And a motorist might cross into a foreign land without being aware of it–an illegally entered alien.

For editing purposes, I combined these short, choppy paragraphs into one paragraph:

> The year was 1934 and it was not a very good year. It was the depth of the Big Depression...the year was lousy. I was standing on the flat, sandy bank of the Rio Grande near its mouth. The Rio Grande flowed into the Gulf of Mexico then. It does now–on those rare occasions when it flows. Much of the the same

> water moves back and forth with the tides. Occasionally a sandbar forms across the mouth, then the river is landlocked. And a motorist might cross into a foreign land without being aware of it– an illegally entered alien.

My paragraph changes, I think, accurately portray the ideas Hart attempted to build upon, and they remain true to the order and flow of the most complete manuscript form.

The fourth manuscript's first ten chapters were the most complete and succinct writing of *Glory of the Silver King*, but are also where most of the paragraph condensing occurs. The last eight chapters, however, are incomplete and required the most organizing and reconstructing on the editor's part. Chapter 11, "The Little Children at Play," consisted of three versions with addenda and detractions. The first two drafts of Chapter 11 had a short section relating to travel through the dark streets of Tampico and Hart's subsequent adventures during the first Tampico Fishing Rodeo. In the third draft, Hart dropped the story and added it to a new chapter four, "Noble Experiments," in which he reinserts the story and adds some of the galavanting he experiences while in Tampico with Ricardo. Chapters Four and 11 presented the greatest amount of chopping and rearranging on the editor's part to help with narrative flow. I used all four draft copies to make the story the most complete and readable form possible.

The most challenging editorial exercise appeared in Chapter 16: "Farewell to the Rio Grande." Stilwell had six versions of the chapter in the manuscript collection, and for good reason. "Farewell to the Rio Grande" represents Stilwell's cathartic farewell, not only to the Rio Grande, but to fishing. Each of the six versions vacillated between

dripping sentimentality, which Hart was often guilty of, and frustration with attempts to capture the beauty of what the outdoors world meant to him. In "Farewell to the Rio Grande," Stilwell attempts to balance the end of the fishing tale of *Glory of the Silver King* with the polemic he presents against overfishing and resource exploitation in Chapters 17 and 18. This juggling act made editing Chapter 16 difficult because I wanted to capture the remorse of the aging Hart Stilwell and the end of his active lifestyle while faithfully arranging the narrative to lead into the final chapters' powerful environmental message. I believe I got as close as I could to Hart's original intent. For any over-sentimentality or poor writing in this section, the editor takes full responsibility.

Beyond structural and line editing for clarity's sake, at no point in the editing did the editor change ideas or make judicious changes of context that the modern day reader may find offensive. In several points of the narrative, Stilwell uses the term "wetback" to describe Mexican laborers who have illegally entered the United States. Taken from another author this could be construed as a derogatory and debasing moniker; however, the reader must understand that Stilwell, in the early 1940-50s, was a major supporter, arguably the Texas progenitor, of the Mexican-American and illegal-alien civil rights movement. When Stilwell uses the term he is speaking from a time that "wetback" was not a politically incorrect adjective. I left Hart's "wetback" and blatant uses of misogyny intact to give the reader the true flavor of his vernacular and mien.

For grammatical structural editing, Stilwell gratuitously used the dash with sentence fragment to make a point. For sentences that read too choppy or disjointed, I substituted the dash for a comma if the convention fit, or I added a conjunction to add the

fragment to the structure of the sentence for flow. Per convention of the day, Hart also used underlines to promote emphasis of a word. I substituted the underline for *italics*. I also substituted the underline for *italics* in the use of foreign languages, in this text, Spanish. For example, *Glory of the Silver King's* manuscript read salsa Veracruzana, which I substituted to read *salsa Veracruzana*. All book titles referred to in the manuscript, per MLA formatting, were changed from underlines to *italics*, as well.

I attempted to keep the manuscript as close to Hart's original as possible beside the changes stated above. I did, however, for readers that are unfamiliar with Ernest Hemingway's work, substitute Stilwell's simple *Bells* on page 10 to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. This transgression was the only injection of the editorial voice into the manuscript. Any unclear writing, jumbled syntax, grammar errors, omissions, or typos in *Glory of the Silver King* are solely the responsibility of me, not Hart's. What is represented here, in my estimation, is a book that Hart would be proud to call his own and a close version of the story he wanted readers to enjoy.

The writing in *Glory of the Silver King* is reminiscent of a young Bedichek or Dobie, but Stilwell relates the folk history of Texas fishing rather than the wilderness of Bedichek or the Texas frontier of Dobie. The story is a great fishing tale, much like Dobie's journey into the folk-tales and remedies of rattling snakes in *Rattlesnakes* or Bedichek's forays into the Texas wild in *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist*. But *Glory of the Silver King* is also a subtle reminder that fishermen and outdoorsmen are facing a lifestyle that is threatened by "progress" as Dobie captures in the dying ways of the cow folk in *Cow People*. Chapters of *Glory of the Silver King*, like portions of Stilwell's

seminal account of poor white frontiers-people living on the turn of the century south Texas border in *Uncovered Wagon*, reads, unassumingly, like a polemic on mankind's encroachment into virgin wild-lands.

Stilwell’s brand of "environmental" message hidden in his earlier writing mask themselves through the first part of *Glory of the Silver King,* which is pure fishing adventure. Stilwell, however, unleashes his vitriol on man's impact on our wildlife and environment and offers a few prescient bits of advice and suggestions to stem the intrusive tide of man's encroachment into the domain of wilderness.

Glory of the Silver King suggests that one of the greatest threats facing our coastal fisheries was the lack of shrimp in our bays and estuaries. In his fishing trilogy, *Fishing in Mexico*, *Glory of the Silver King*, and *Hunting and Fishing in Texas*, Stilwell attacks the great numbers of commercial shrimpers that troll coastal bays. He accuses them of effectively wiping out the quality of shrimp in the ocean. Stilwell remembered the day when only five Gulf shrimp would compose a pound.

To remedy the situation, Stilwell suggests starting a shrimpers’ license buy-back program to limit the number of shrimpers in the Gulf and Texas bays. He wrote these words in the years between 1968 to 1971. Texas Parks & Wildlife did not begin the shrimp license buy-back until 2001, almost thirty years after Stilwell first suggested it.

Throughout *Glory of the Silver King*, Stilwell's prose, most often married to the hard-boiled style of the newspaper editor he once was, develops a certain edge of softness that creeps into the story as he writes. We can, however, forgive Stilwell for the

encroaching softness in his narrative. He is, in fact, relating the story of the glory days of tarpon fishing in Texas, but he is also reminiscing on a life once lived in the company of other adventurous and tough men in wild and untamed waters. As Stilwell writes *Glory of the Silver King*, it becomes obvious the memories he captures on paper are his “last” fishing trips. At one point in *Glory of the Silver King*, he reminds the reader that not all promised fishing trips will come true, and in the end, the only promise we all keep is the one with death.

From the pages of *Glory of the Silver King*, Stilwell is reluctant to predict the decline of the tarpon because by doing so he would relinquish his faith in his fellow man to do something about it and protect their environmental domain. Stilwell’s insistent faith in mankind’s ability to do the right thing, though, does not deter him from warning the reader that if something is not done to stem the affects of a wayward mankind on his environment we will never experience the world as he did. In the narrative, Stilwell attempts to pass on the beauty of his experiences and bequeath us the gifts of the silver king in all its glory. Yet Stilwell did this knowing this was his last book. So in reverence and respect to the greatest fish alive and one of the most interesting characters in Texas letters, I can only hope I did Stilwell's words justice.

PART TWO

GLORY OF THE SILVER KING

BY
HART STILWELL

EDITED BY
BRANDON D. SHULER

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PROLOGUE

AND IN THE BEGINNING...

The year was 1934 and it was not a very good year. It was the depth of the Big Depression...the year was lousy. I was standing on the flat, sandy bank of the Rio Grande near its mouth. The Rio Grande flowed into the Gulf of Mexico then. It does now–on those rare occasions when it flows. Much of the the same water moves back and forth with the tides. Occasionally a sandbar forms across the mouth, then the river is landlocked. And a motorist might cross into a foreign land without being aware of it–illegally entered alien.

Water was flowing that day back in 1934–quite a nice current. Mullet by the tens of thousands were moving upstream to feed on plankton and other goodies moving down with the current. And tarpon by the thousands were cruising near the mouth of the river grazing on the mullet. This might be termed cannibalism twice removed, since tarpon and mullet are distant cousins. But cannibalism doesn't bother fish anymore than it does human beings–the objective is survival.

Out in front of me in the moderately clear water the big fish were showing. Silver kings, we call them. The jumbo herring, the king-size sardine. The tarpon were rolling, as fishermen say in describing the motion of this fish when it comes to the surface to gulp a big breath of what was once referred to as fresh air. Tarpon are an old, old species.

They have functional, although somewhat rudimentary lungs–funny little reddish strips inside the air bladder. This is the gadget that helps fish maintain a certain water level without effort. But it is more than a mere balance to a tarpon. It is a lung, and periodically he must give it some air.

If a tarpon is staying in one spot, letting a current bring the food to him, he turns sideways at the surface, showing a broad, silvery side that glistens in the sunlight. As he turns to go back down after getting the breath of air, he is likely to slap the surface of the water with his tail–it is a nice sound. If the fish shows some other way he is either feeding at the surface or traveling. I'll talk about that later.

I had never seen a tarpon before that day, even though I had lived at Brownsville, only thirty miles from the mouth of the Rio Grande as the crow is supposed to fly but never does. The Rio Grande sure doesn't go in a straight line in that part of its delta. It throws loop on loop like a sidewinder moving across hot sand, and it is more that ninety miles from the mouth of the river to Brownsville as the river "flies."

So I was getting all set to do battle with my first tarpon–my first silver king. I smile now as I reflect on that first cast. I was using a huge surf rod, a mighty saltwater reel and a bait combination that Rube Goldberg[1] might have dreamed up. The bait was a mullet, hooked through the head from the bottom with a hook big enough to hold a small whale. Above the hook was a big swivel, and attached to that was a five-foot chunk of heavy steel leader. At the other end of the leader was another swivel, and topping off the rig was a square cork attached to the line.

It took a long, rugged rod and a hefty heave by the angler to get all that junk out into the river where the tarpon were, so the line had to be strong. Merely trying to cast that rig would have broken the far lighter lines I used later in my battles with the silver king.

I managed to get my bait combination far enough out so the current would carry it to the school of tarpon. As it neared them I popped the cork, as fishermen say, by jerking with the rod tip. It is one of the most effective techniques in taking tarpon as well as many other species of gamefish, particularly channel bass, which we in Texas call redfish; weakfish, which we call speckled trout; and snook, which we used to call pike but now call snook. Practically all pole-and-line commercial fishermen use the cork-popping technique. When you jerk, the cork goes under, making a nice plunking sound. When the cork bounces back up, it pulls the mullet upward. Gamefish down below think the mullet is making a dash for the surface, trying to escape. A big fish, even if he's not hungry, can't endure the sight of a little fish escaping.

The second time I popped the cork a six-foot tarpon latched onto the mullet and almost yanked me into the river as it took off on a wild run. Yes, I know fish don't run–they swim. But to fishermen they run. I had tightened the star drag on the big reel so much that the tarpon got a solid pull against me, and I had trouble holding my grip on the sand. At the end of the run the tarpon burst high in the air and rattled its gills. That's what we call it–rattling gills. If you insist on precise terminology, you would say the tarpon rattled his gill flaps. And if you said that, the tarpon fishermen I know would consider you a nut of some kind.

The silver king really does a fancy job of gill rattling. He opens his mouth wide and shakes his head from side to side so fast that you see only a blur. It wasn't until years later that I learned, by studying photos, that the fish actually moves his head through an arc of 180 degrees. So in some shot I made it seemed that the fish's neck was broken and his head dangling at right angles to his body. That's what a tarpon does in trying to turn loose when he realizes he clamped down on the wrong thing. And the noise of gill rattling is like that of giant castanets. You can hear it a quarter mile away–another very nice sound.

And *please* don't bug me by saying that the tarpon making that "nice sound" is in pain and terror. I *know* that. I also know what's happening to the boxers in the ring and the football players who crack each other up. Much that man calls sport is and has been since the beginning the inflicting of pain in one way or another. I ain't trying to reform him–and I choose not to be reconstructed in my own attitudes. After all, the most vicious "sport" of all is that inflicted with words.

While my first tarpon was in the air–even before he fell heavily back to the water–I became an instant aficionado. An addict. I knew that I had found the kind of fishing worthy of dedicated effort. So for thirty years I pursued the big sardine, all the way from the Louisiana-Texas line to the southern tip of the Gulf of Mexico, where offshore waters are the Gulf of Campeche, not the Gulf of Mexico. I followed him up the big Panuco River, billed for years as the king of tarpon rivers. I went all the way to Carmen, land of iguanas and coconuts and parrots. I saw the Southern Cross there. Pretty puny sight–a big tarpon is more interesting. I followed the jumbo herring out into the open Gulf as far

as he goes–to Isla de los Sabalos (Tarpon Island) offshore from Vera Cruz, Mexico. I worked hundred of miles of surf, fished all the inlets I could reach, explored bays and canals and ship channels and tiny rivers where the tarpon had never before seen an artificial lure. Wherever tarpon moved, I followed.

I have battled the big fellow with all kinds of tackle, ranging from the mighty rig I used at the beginning on through a process of evolution winding up with something just about perfect for the job. There can never be *the* perfect tarpon casting rig because he comes in different sizes. Real fine light tackle for three-footers isn't worth a hoot if a six-footer takes hold, unless you're the kind of nut who wants to chase a fish, using a boat, for six hours and do ten years bragging. And gear that is perfect for the six-footers doesn't give a flashy two-footer a chance to really show what he can do. It would be real nice if an angler could put a "No Babies Allowed" sign on the plugs for the big ones and "No Adults Allowed" on plugs for the little tarpon. Real nice–if a tarpon could read and, having read, followed instructions instead of doing what human beings do. But let's get on with the story.

Actually, my thirty-year pursuit of the tarpon just about spanned the days of glory of fishing for the silver king–the rise, the peak period, and the decline. I choose not to say "decline and fall"–at least not at the moment. In fact, I tell this story in the hope that it might, in a small way, contribute to the survival of the great fish. But this is not a book on ecology. Anybody who can hear or read or understand ASL (American Sign Language) knows the estuarine creatures–crustaceans, fishes, some mollusks, etc.–are in

a bad way. And the tarpon is an estuarine fish–part of its life cycle is spent in brackish or fresh water. Thousands of specialists are busy trying to save those estuarine species–that is, the species that have commercial value. I tell a fishing story. I present here the drama of battling at close range the greatest gamefish that can be caught by casting and I get a kick out of retelling my story. Perhaps you will get some vicarious joy from a retelling of those moments of drama. You might even become interested enough to go along with me when I say that the tarpon *can* be saved, even though no efforts along that line are being made now.

Why?

Because he is not considered a commercial species, such as the weakfish and flounder and striped bass and channel bass and shrimp and oysters that marine biologists are struggling to save. If the tarpon is saved, this happy event will take place as something of a byproduct of our campaign to save the creatures we eat. So I will tell my fishing story. Then in the last chapter I will put down some things I think we might do to keep this "Eagle of the Seas" from joining the dodo in serene oblivion.

I've got some ideas that might seem pretty dopey to you. For example, how about bringing the tarpon inland? If that sounds screwball just note progress now being made in the campaign to bring the striped bass, another estuarine fish, inland. You can reasonably claim that the parallel is not valid because the tarpon is a tropical fish that cannot endure cold temperatures in our lakes. And I can counter by saying that this is not the only country on earth, and maybe the tarpon can be brought inland in tropical areas.

That's not all.

If he needs fairly warm water to survive, heat the doggone water. What's wrong with heating the Great Lakes? We spend millions doing things far dopier. Then tarpon hatcheries can be set up and man can step in and conduct the love life of the tarpon, just as he now performs the mating ritual for rainbow trout and for those striped bass being brought inland. It's a cinch the environment in this country in the year 2,000 A.D. is going to be about 95 percent manmade. Why not fit the tarpon into that environment, just as we do with hand-fed deer and pen-raised quail and so on?

But let's get on with the fishing story.

CHAPTER I

THE SPORT OF PRESIDENTS

People refer to horse racing as the sport of kings. I like to think of tarpon fishing as the sport of presidents.

There is at least a fragment of logic in this designation. A President-elect, Warren Gamaliel Harding, and a President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, were responsible for calling attention of the American public to the tarpon. Few Americans knew there was such a fish before newspapers in the land flashed that famous FDR smile in a picture, with a huge, well-dead tarpon suspended beside the President. Suddenly tarpon fishing became fashionable–except among those economic bourbons who had substituted a curse on FDR for the traditional grace before meal. But Harding conducted the ground-breaking ceremony–the prelude. He went to the little Texas coastal town of Point Isabel, now called Port Isabel, back in the early 1920s, and he fished for tarpon.

I have only a vague recollection of the visit because, even though Brownsville was my home, I was doing time at the University of Texas in Austin. Furthermore, I considered Harding a fatuous fake that should never have been inflicted upon the people of any nation. I do recall that the inauguration was later then than it is now, and that Harding went to Point Isabel, which is only thirty miles from Brownsville, as a guest of the late R.B. Creager, Republican boss of Texas for a quarter of a century. And I recall

mention of the President-elect fishing for tarpon. They sure must have moved up from Mexico early that year. But–nothing is too good for a President-elect, even though he could be an incredibly dull buffoon. So Americans generally heard about the tarpon, although no grand rush to catch the fish resulted, as it did after the FDR tarpon jaunt. Things changed then. Tarpon are Democrats.

It was in the middle of the Grand Depression, and people were searching for something, just anything, that would furnish a moment's relief from the dread monotony of unemployment and hunger. So when the man in that old shopworn "man stands beside dead fish" picture turned out to be the President, people looked, wondered, and reacted. At last they *knew* there was such a fish as the tarpon, and that he was considered some punkins among the angling elite. I doubt if a picture of Melville standing beside Moby Dick would have aroused more interest. Everybody knew there are whales. So this one is white? Who cared? So it is fictional and demonstrated strange reactions that could result only from thinking at the human level. Who cared?

So for my money, the era of glory of the silver king started that day back in the 1930s...I think it was 1936, but I could be off a year one way or the other. And that era of glory was of importance to me in several ways. I had just launched my long career as an outdoor writer, and editors of such magazines as *Field & Stream, Outdoor Life,* and *Sports Afield* looked with much more interest on tarpon fishing articles that I sent them. That increased interest meant more income from my fishing activity (actually, I could have been classified as a commercial fisherman), so I was able to start roaming the vast coastline of the Gulf of Mexico in pursuit of tarpon.

FDR caught his tarpon in waters at Port Aransas, on up the coast from Port Isabel. He made the trip in a ship–I think it was the presidential yacht. His trip coincided with the beginning of the once famed tarpon rodeos along the coast of Texas, and later in Mexico, particularly in the Panuco River at Tampico.

Of course tarpon fishing started long before that–way back in the previous century. In fact, I am sure that natives along rivers in tropical countries have been catching tarpon, for purposes of eating, for thousands of years. They still do along many of the rivers in Mexico. But I am talking about anglers deliberately going after tarpon for sport, not those who accidentally hooked one of the big fellows while fishing for something else and not the natives who caught tarpon on heavy hand-lines and ate the fish. In the latter part of the past century there were quite a few anglers who sought out tarpon in the shore waters and estuaries and canals of Florida and a few in Texas. But in earlier days 99 percent of anglers were “meat fishermen” and they considered those who deliberately hung tarpon as a class of nuts.

“Why fool with a big, dangerous fish that’s not fit to eat?” was the general attitude, and I loved that attitude. It meant that only a few anglers went after tarpon, and this big gamefish won’t put up with crowding by anglers. He either takes off or learns how to ignore them. So let the meat fishermen have their fun in their own peculiar way, and I say peculiar since they can buy the same fish in the market at one-tenth the cost, a logical situation, since a commercial fisherman is ten times more efficient than an amateur.

I became a dedicated tarpon fisherman for reasons that I consider eminently sound, and they can all be lumped into one statement I have already made: The tarpon is the greatest of all gamefish that can be caught by casting a lure. Yes, I've spent time, plenty of it struggling with other great gamefish, some far larger than tarpon. Hemingway wasn't telling me anything new in *The Old Man in the Sea,* and if the Noble Prize judges had gone to the trouble of catching a marlin, then catching a tarpon by casting, they would have awarded Hemingway his prize, which he deserved, for some other book. *A Farewell to Arms*, or maybe *For Whom the Bell Tolls*–not for the overblown chunk of rather mushy melodrama about that old man and his marlin.

Sure, I've battled marlin. If you want to fight big gamefish, you should do the same. A stirring experience. But I get an odd feeling of detachment when a marlin puts on his show, even when every flap of his tail as he maintains his position during that fantastic aerial run is telegraphed to me through the line. He's too far away–two hundred, maybe three hundred yards. I have an illusion that it's happening to somebody else and I am a mere spectator. But did you never look up at a giant silver king arched over your little car-top boat and see him glaring down at you as he rattles his gills, flinging a big plug from side to side? Do that before you low-rate the tarpon as a gamefish.

You troll for billfish, and almost all the time with live bait–which really isn't live anymore. That's okay with me. I still love to troll for marlin and sails. But you can't do any good casting for them, especially with a lure. Now and then some free sails will follow a hooked fish up to the boat, and if you let your bait down and jiggle it, you might get a strike. But it's not casting. How *can* you cast with a seven-foot rod and a twelve-

foot leader? You can’t. So you never experience that thrill of the jolt that comes when you drop a lure on a feeding tarpon, maybe thirty yards away, and he blasts at the surface and bounces instantly into the air.

Anyway, tarpon fishing as a sport for many thousands of Americans, maybe hundreds of thousands in the days of glory, began coming into its own not long after the President-elect and then the President moved into the picture, but I’d better hurry back to the mouth of the Rio Grande and do something about the tarpon I had on my line that day in 1934. It isn’t fair to leave him there rattling his gills forever.

CHAPTER II

THE FAT LADY

"It's a fat female," said Hurt Batsell. "You've got your work cut out for you." I wasn't paying much attention to comments–too many things happening all at once.

Hurt Batsell lives at Brownsville. He is the man who took me by the hand and led me into the world of tarpon fishing. It was pretty new to him, although he had fished for other saltwater gamefish for years. I hadn't.

I had a silver queen, not a silver king, on my line. A fat lady, as tarpon fishermen say. The female is broader in the beam and thicker than the male. She is not as likely to wear herself out lunging into the air again and again. She dogs it....sometimes on and on. The human female is not the only one that knows the survival value of sheer endurance.

Under ordinary circumstances I could have stopped that six-foot fat lady with the mighty gear I had. A fish does not take off in a straight line and run forever when it feels the hook and the drag of the line. It makes a run, then, if it's a tarpon, it probably tops the run off with a burst in the air, tossing in some gill rattling. When it falls back to the water it may hesitate, sort of regrouping mentally and meditating on strategy. You go to work then, pumping and reeling to get some line back. When the tarpon takes off again, it may go in a different direction. It may even come directly at the angler, in which case it is almost certain to get slack, which makes throwing the lure easier. The fish battles that

way–a run, a leap, a pause, a run in a different direction. If you can hang on, the runs become shorter and less speedy, the jumps fewer and less violent. You wear the fish down.

But my situation was not typical. You could properly say that the point of sandy beach on which I stood, where river met gulf, was my point of no return. No sane person in possession of all his faculties would venture far beyond that point, for rollers were washing on up to the beach, and the rip tides caused by the strong river current meeting gulf waters kept washing little holes in the sandy bottom. I can swim all right. But I don't do a fancy job of it when I'm fully clothed, wearing hip boots, and hanging onto a big rod and reel with a tarpon on the end of the line taking full advantage of the current in its dash for the open sea. That's what my fat lady was doing–heading for the open sea. My only hope was to sort of nudge her out of the current and into the eddy water near shore. Then the rollers would come to my aid and rip tides might help, but that wasn't the fat lady's idea. She refused to be nudged out of the current, even though it curved a bit toward shore.

I had no place to go. I went anyway. No man abandons his first tarpon without giving it the old college try. I followed the big fish until water was up to my arm pits and small rollers were breaking over my head at times and line kept spinning off the reel faster than ever. I was vaguely aware of some shouting on shore behind me. At first, I didn't hear what was being said–too much concentration on the fat lady. Then the sand on which I was standing suddenly melted away, and all of a sudden I was hearing that sound from shore–loud and clear.

“I’m casting out–LATCH ON!” Hurt was shouting.

He had used cutting pliers to snip the steel leader just above the hook and had quickly replaced hook and mullet with a sinker weighing about the same–heavy enough for a long cast but not heavy enough to sink the cork. He had to get the mullet off because a free tarpon might take the thing as it neared me. Or, still worse, a shark might latch on. Plenty of sharks were cruising those waters a bit farther out than the tarpon. Sharks love to assemble in such spots, where they can lie in wait for a tarpon foolish enough to flip a fin in water roiled up by clash of river current and gulf. Tarpon usually ignore the sharks, and you get the impression that the sharks are ignoring the tarpon. The two swim surprisingly close to each other at times, merely cruising. Each knows exactly what he is doing. The tarpon is faster and knows it. So does the shark. But let some misfortune, such as getting fast to a fishing line, happen to the tarpon and there is likely to be a wild and bloody flurry–and the angler winds in a tarpon’s head, they don’t give prizes for tarpon heads.

I sort of floated for a moment when the sand washed out from under my feet, then I was on moderately firm sand again–at least temporarily. I turned and saw a cork floating right to me. Just as I latched onto it, my fat lady made a frantic run–a shark probably spotted her–and there was a popping noise as all the line ran off my reel. It broke at the knot I had tied, running the line through a little hole that makers of reels put in the reel spool for that purpose. Maybe they still do that. I wouldn’t know, since I abandoned such heavy reels years ago. But that hole...it is without doubt the most stupid thing ever conceived by man. The line is *certain* to break at the sharp edge of the little

hole. Otherwise it is *certain* to break near the leader, where it is weakest. Casting wears the line there. One way you lose all your line–the other way you save it all. Of course I should have clamped down before all the line ran off. Let it break where it should. But when you're grabbing a cork with one hand and standing on floating sand, you don't think of all those things.

Batsell "landed" me by pumping and reeling much as he would have done in working in a big spent tarpon.

When I waded out onto the shore, he said, "I wouldn't try that again."

"I won't," I promised.

Such promises aren't worth any more than the ones a man makes to his wife. Your reactions when you fish for tarpon are conditioned reflexes. If the tarpon shows, you cast at him, even though he is only ten feet from your eggshell of a boat. Solemn oaths mean nothing in moments of unexpected temptation. You cast and worry later. Some pretty dopey things can happen when you do that, like the time a five-footer landed smack in Batsell's lap on its first leap right beside our little boat. So there he was shouting "Shoo! Shoo!" as though a tarpon understood chicken language, while the big fish was fluttering and banging around.

It finally "shooed."

I ran another line on my reel and assembled another rig. I moved upstream a bit from the school of tarpon and heaved my booby trap bait out far enough so the current would carry it to the fish. I hung another one, a lean, long, fiery male. The hook must

have got a bite in the tarpon's funny bone, for it went nuts, spending more time in the air than in the water. It seemed to use the water only for "footing" so it could launch itself aloft once more. In a fairly short time I was able to work that one in close to shore and get a grip on the leader. As I slid the tarpon onto the sand, Batsell got a pair of pliers and took out the big hook. Then, to my astonishment, he started shoving the fish, with his feet, back toward the water.

"Hey, man! What are you doing?" I said, alarmed.

"We never kill a tarpon," he said.

"You crazy or something! That's my first tarpon. Nobody is going to put it back in the river."

I lugged the jumbo herring home and showed it to people until the stink got so strong that I couldn't take it. Then I gave him a decent Christian burial.

CHAPTER III

KING OF TARPON RIVERS

I am going to skip eight years and more than three hundred miles to tell you about tarpon at a different fishing hole. Then I'll go back and pick up anything that seems worth picking up. There is no rule saying I must observe chronological order in telling this story.

The place is the Panuco, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico at the city of Tampico. Although I had run into some spectacular tarpon fishing in Mexico, at and near inlets into the huge Laguna Madre of Mexico, I had not fished the Panuco. One reason was money–the depression was just winding down, largely because of the buildup for war. The second reason was the war. It was 1942 and for more than a year no tackle for sports fishermen had been made and none was going to be made for a long time. So those of us who had acquired special tackle for tarpon nursed the stuff–we were reluctant to go to the Panuco and watch the monsters there chew up our plugs and bust our lines.

Those Panuco tarpon were monsters, as proved by a world record fish that I saw when the man who caught it (I do not recall his name), proudly displayed it at the Brownsville Airport on his way back home. It was a 247-pounder, far greater than any tarpon ever caught on tackle, although I heard unverified reports now and then of 300-pounders being caught in nets. The man who caught the record fish left the impression

with me that all tarpon in the Panuco were giants. “It is the King of Tarpon Rivers,” he said–and soon the people at Tampico, noting success of various tarpon rodeos along the Texas coast, decided to capitalize on what they had. They announced the first Tampico Tarpon Rodeo.

Soon afterward I got a letter from Felix Florencia, who operates a tackle store in Tampico and headed the first tarpon rodeo organization, asking me to take part in the rodeo as his guest. He had seen some magazine articles of mine about tarpon fishing, and said he hoped I would write up their rodeo. I conferred with my two regular fishing companions, Hurt Batsell and Dave Young, and they agreed to go along. But they were worried about tackle, so I wrote Felix, explaining the situation.

He called me.

“You don’t have to bring tackle,” he said. “I’ve got plenty for you.”

“But there will be three of us,” I explained. “Also we expect to pay all our expenses but the boat, in case you will take us out in yours.”

I don’t like deadheading and never have. The few times I let myself be fast-talked into a free junket, the results weren’t too hot. In the first place, it really wasn’t free. I never made any long trips alone, and I would arrange to pay my share of the total cost, reduced by only one deadhead. I learned early in the game that you commit yourself too deeply. Not only are you expected to get stories in magazines and newspapers, but you are *bound* to say only favorable things.

“I’ll have tackle for all of you,” Felix assured me.

“But we use lures,” I said, “not mullet.”

“We don’t use mullet either,” he said. “We use Pflueger Record spoons. Tarpon can’t hurt them.”

I had told him in my letter that the big ones in the Panuco were likely to crush our lures, many of which had punk, American made hooks instead of fine Swedish hooks. So I was relieved about the plugs. And about lines, which were in scarce supply. And even more about rods. For I had a good idea what might happen to our long, one-piece, relatively light rods in those DC3 planes. I’d had a few busted when they were poked under the seats, which was the only place to put them, and there were few replacements.

Hurt and Dave and I had made the transition to moderately light casting tackle years before the junket to Tampico. We seldom trolled. And I figured we would do plenty of casting in the Panuco. I sure was disillusioned in a hurry on that idea. But when you go to another man’s fishing hole, you do as he does, as I will explain later.

When we cruised out onto the broad Panuco and saw the telltale flashes of light on the water a mile upstream, I was willing to admit that it deserved its title as the “King of Tarpon Rivers.” The Panuco makes the Rio Grande in its lower delta area look like a crooked drain ditch running through wasteland. The Panuco is broad, a half mile in places. The Rio Grande is so narrow at times that we used to trick suckers by betting that we could cast across it–at the mouth. The suckers always fell for the bait, for they had been watching us cast, and we weren’t going halfway across. But replace that seven-eighths-ounce plug with a lead sinker the same weight and you could throw the thing

away–or at least across the Rio Grande at the mouth. And nothing was said in the bet about what object we would cast.

The Panuco is in the tropics–beautiful tropics. Bananas and papayas and palms and all manner of other lovely foliage line its banks, and there is river traffic. Whereas the only water traffic in the Rio Grande were a few funny little paddle-wheel boats used during the later part of the past century to link Brownsville to the Gulf, where cargo was littered out to waiting ships. There were river launches in the Panuco, operating on schedule, carrying both passengers and freight. There were awkward-looking freight boats pushed along by one oarsman. And I say pushed, not pulled, because the man stood up and pushed on his oar handles, the way so many people do in Asia and some other parts of the world. It's easier on a man to stand and lean into oars than it is to sit and pull.

And there were dugouts and canoes of all sizes, some so tiny I was amazed to note how effectively they served their one passenger.

There was human habitation all along the stream–and along the lower delta of the Rio Grande there is nothing but scrub brush and willows. We even managed to locate a little cantina right on the river bank, and we had a fine time resting in the shade of banana plants and drinking tequila to give us strength for the next tarpon–that we didn't catch. And it sure was untouched by gringo hands. No tourist trade. The man at the little cantina wouldn't even take our U.S. coins, a few of which were left over when we changed to Mexican money. But the bartender would take one-half pesos–and I mean that literally. People, probably frightened by all kinds of war rumors, had hidden their metal money. Their was a simple solution to the problem of change–tear a peso bill in

half. Everybody went along fine with the idea, and so did we. The half peso was worth about eight cents, as I recall it, so we didn't need smaller change. Cost of replacing those torn bills became so great that the Mexican government finally worked some strategy, I don't recall exactly what, and got metal money back in circulation.

Our plane reached Tampico in the morning the day before the rodeo started, we did no fishing that day. We didn't even see the Panuco. The rodeo committee had banned all tarpon fishing in the river for a week before the big event, figuring that would increase the catch. So Felix and a couple of other Tampico men met us at the airport and took us to the hotel, then we went to his tackle store, and we saw the tackle we were going to use.

I wouldn't look at Hurt or Dave. It was the kind of tackle that operators of a charter boat use, in self defense, in taking landlubbers out to battle giant bluefin tuna. The rods were short and as thick as a billiard cue in the middle. The reels weighed three pounds. The line looked like a small rope. And at the end dangled a heavy ten-foot steel leader topped off by that mighty Pflueger Record spoon. I think it was listed as the No. 7 spoon, but I'm not sure.

"How come you don't use mullet," I asked Felix.

"They hit the spoon much better," he said. "They seldom hit mullet at all."

This was cockeyed and I knew it, for the Pflueger Record is intended to simulate a mullet in action, trying to escape, and I knew that any time tarpon would hit the spoon, they would hit mullet. But...I was the guest. In the other man's fishing hole...

Dinner that night at the Tampico Club was one of those things you talk about years later. Tampico is famed for its rock crabs. We had them. It is famed for red snapper, caught over submerged coral reefs not far from shore. There can be no finer food than the baked snapper with *salsa Veracruzana* we had that night. And the papayas...and the aquacates, *real* ones, not what we know as avocado. This was Mexico, unadulterated except by early Spaniards. And the fact that Felix and one other man spoke English didn't bother me. I get along in Spanish and Dave is completely bilingual.

Since I am conditioned to fishing practices of my fellow Texans, I was up long before dawn the next morning, "feeling" the air, speculating on prospects. A flat rule of mine in saltwater fishing, and other fishing as well, is that you greet the fish at dawn. I've seen hundreds of articles in print claiming that the theory is wrong. Should go by moon pull. I didn't bother to read them. I like to meet fish at dawn, but that day the meeting took place, after a number of leisurely discussions at the yacht basin on the river, at 9 o'clock. And it ended promptly at 1 p.m., after which fishermen gathered in the dinning room of the yacht club for drinks and a leisurely dinner, then went home for a leisurely siesta. Ah, how charming the ways of Mexico. How sad that the "Nordic Horde," as I like to call gringo turistas, is forcing a change.

Then I saw our boats. Felix had chartered two. They were the river passenger-freight boats, about twenty-eight feet long, and with a canopy from bow to stern. Real nice for shade, which you learn to love in that tropical country. But we couldn't have done any casting even if we had brought our gear. I did ask Felix if he had and lighter

tackle than the stuff he dug out for me. He and I fished from one boat, Dave and Hurt from the other.

“You’re not used to the kind of tarpon we’ve got in this river,” he said with pride. “The grandpapas and grandmamas stay here–the grandchildren go to Texas, where you catch them. You’ll be glad you have this tackle.”

The host speaketh...

So we trolled, if you could call it that, upstream until we reached the big bend where literally thousands of tarpon were showing–more tarpon than I had ever seen in any one spot before. And we trolled through them–and nothing happened. I couldn’t figure trolling at that speed, about six miles an hour, maybe seven. On rare occasions when I do troll for tarpon, I barely move. So I asked felix.

“The boat has only one speed,” he said.

The host speaketh again...

I’ve encountered tarpon that would strike *only* at a lure racing along, but it was racing on the surface, and the conditions were different, as I will explain later. Sure, trolling fast often pays off if your after sailfish. But the sail is a speed demon, a cold-water fish that likes to show speed. In general tarpon, warm water fish, are lazy...until they feel a hook.

On and on we trolled. Nothing happened.

Occasionally I saw some angler battling a tarpon. One fisherman, a fellow American, was pancaking a six-footer so hard when it jumped that it quit that nonsense in a hurry, whereupon the angler cranked it in. I also noticed that what little action I saw

was taking place in the relatively straight stretches between the big bends, not in the bends where tarpon were concentrated.

In those straight stretches tarpon were on the move. I could tell by the way showed when coming up for air–snout first, then dorsal fin straight up, then a tip of the tail. In the schools tarpon were rolling sideways, which indicated they were at least staying at our near the bottom, even though I had no idea whether they were feeding there, a question I sure cleared up later in a spectacular way.

I suggested to Felix that he have our skipper troll past one of those traveling tarpon and drag our spoons in front of the fish. Felix said the skipper knew plenty about tarpon fishing. In other words, it was time for me to quit telling him and the skipper how to catch tarpon.

I quit.

That morning Felix had two strikes–in fairly straight stretches of the river. Of course there are no really straight stretches in any river untouched by man–there are no straight lines in nature, not even in the movement of light, as Einstein explained. There *are* straight rivers–or stretches of river. But they're manmade, and I'll tell you later about some fishing experiences in them.

I had only one lone strike–when the boat was coming about to head downstream. My big old lure was wobbling down toward the bottom at the time. There was so much slack in the line I couldn't strike the fish. But later in the day we began mulling over the strike and decided there was something we might do the next day to get action.

So far as the rodeo people were concerned, the day was a glorious success. The 150 or so anglers, about a third of them from this country, brought in close to twenty tarpon, as I recall it, and topping the list was a giant almost seven feet long and weighing 197 pounds. In that rodeo any tarpon under five feet was considered a baby, so maybe quite a few smaller ones had been caught. They could not be entered.

The smaller ones were there, however. And I regretted still more that I didn't have my casting gear, for I just knew I could have latched onto some of the four- and five- footers that I saw rolling, or traveling.

During the four hours of fishing I never saw one tarpon strike at the surface, except a couple that bounced into the air after hitting lures–not my lure. And I saw no mullet. This seemed real strange to me, for that broad, clear blue river certainly should be a fantastic feeding place for mullet. Maybe that's why it wasn't–that clear, blue water, with no place to hide. Mullet like shallow water, such as that on grassy flats in a bay, if it is clear, but where their enemies are, they like some kind of protection–murky water, a tide rip, a stretch of shallow shore. You don't find those conditions up the Panuco, and we didn't catch any tarpon. Dave and Hurt had two strikes and caught nothing. Fine fishing day.

CHAPTER IV

NOBLE EXPERIMENTS

After that water haul on the first day of fishing, Dave and Hurt and I joined several other rodeo contestants at Felix Florencia's tackle store for the customary afternoon bull session. I cautioned my companions about saying anything that might wound the feelings of Felix or some other Tampico resident–I mean about criticizing their way of fishing. But we *had* to do something. We didn't want to spend three days hanging onto that mighty gear with the big spoon tugging at it. We discussed phoning home and having some of our gear shipped down on the plane next day. But...chances are the irreplaceable rods might be broken, and Felix, lending us his tackle graciously, would be offended. At the bull session all the talk was about the big ones that others had caught, and nobody was much interested in what we *didn't* catch.

I did notice several huge plugs for sale. The price was sky high, and after studying them we were convinced that they would spin instead of wobbling when they were trolled at that six-mile clip. They would wind up the line–that's all.

I did arrange a shift in personnel in the boats. I told Felix I would like to fish from the other boat, with Dave, and let Hurt fish with him, giving the excuse that I would have a good chance of getting action photos when he hung a tarpon. Dave and Hurt and I had figured a bit of strategy, based on the bump I had while the boat was making a turn.

Dave, speaking Spanish the same as the Mexicans, could *make* the skipper do what we wanted. And he could use me, the *famous writer*, as reason for a change in strategy. Hurt didn't mind, but insisted that he shift back after we did a bit of *training* on our skipper. He'd be in the second boat the last day.

When we got to the tarpon, Dave asked the skipper to stop the boat momentarily. When it stopped, we let the lures go on down then retrieved them–and Dave had a bump. But here came Felix in his boat, wanting to know if we were having boat trouble. So we trolled on, trying still another trick. We would bring the lure right up to the boat then release tension and let it wobble down toward the bottom until it was a hundred yards away, then throw the drag back on. Nothing notable happened. And we had to give up after fifteen or twenty minutes because of the pull of that mighty Pflueger Record spoon.

I never could understand the aqua-dynamics of that spoon–don't know enough about physics. Since the outside–the bottom of the "spoon"–was down, you would figure that the chunk of metal would ride along the surface when dragged at six miles an hour. It would now and then, whereupon you cured the situation by letting out a bit of line. The spoon dug down. It swung horizontally through an arc of about four feet, and in the process it exerted so much pressure that tension of the brake would slip if you tried to reel the spoon in by simply cranking. So we had to *pump* our lures in to get them near the boat–raise the rod tip slowly, then reel rapidly while lowering it and on and on. So our idea of hauling the spoon up to the boat and releasing tension, so that it would dig down, was abandoned after about twenty minutes. Too doggone much hard work.

"Let's try the damn straightaways and see if we can hang a traveler," I said to Dave.

He conveyed the message to Vicente, our skipper. Any time Dave is around, I let him do the talking in Spanish. We saw a few loners but never could get the boatman to put the lure where we wanted it. What he usually did was scare the hell out of the fish by practically cruising over it. So we cruised up to our cantina and took a break, consoling ourselves with the fine tequila. Back we came...and the same old story.

During the day other anglers caught enough big ones to make the day a howling success, rodeo-wise. Of course fifteen or twenty fish distributed among 150 anglers is not my idea of spectacular fishing, especially if I am among the 130 or more who catch nothing. But you string up twenty giant tarpon on a pole and you've got something to work with when it comes to taking photos–if your objective is to interest people here and there in the world in the rodeo. Felix did land a tarpon, one barely under the five-foot minimum for entry in the rodeo competition. And Hurt had a couple of strikes but did not make contact.

I made careful note that the most successful anglers were those who trolled what seemed to be a half mile back of the boat–it certainly was 200 yards or more. I'm accustomed to trolling, when I do at all, about forty or fifty yards behind a boat. One reason is that I usually have the kind of gear that won't stand up if a tarpon hits two hundred yards away–line too light and not enough of it left on the reel. But with that giant Panuco gear you could stop a six-footer dead in his tracks. So I decided the last day out I would troll way back, damn near the end of my line. I couldn't think of anything

else that might be considered constructive. I had just about lost interest in the rodeo insofar as my own fishing was concerned. I began, on the third day out, haunting other boats, trying to get action shots–and since I was back with Felix, he didn't mind that suggestion.

I dedicated more attention, the previous night, to certain good things in life calculated to take my mind off defeat in the rodeo–mainly a nice cathouse not far from the center of town. I talked to Felix and he arranged for a friend of his, I'll call him Ricardo Villareal, to go with me to the favorite cathouse of businessmen in the city. In Mexico the attitude towards prostitution, which has always been legal, is quite different from the attitude here. It is pretty generally accepted that any man able to finance the procedure will visit whorehouses and maybe his favorite girl there–maybe eventually set her up in a little place of her own. There is no stigma attached, as there is–or was until the past few years–in this country. I'm not concerning myself here with relative moral values, I merely say that I have enjoyed this part of the Mexican culture down through the years–and with no feeling of guilt. I got Ricardo to go with me because I knew Hurt and Dave wouldn't. I didn't even ask them.

You talk about getting my mind off the rodeo–I sure did. Beforehand I wondered a bit about my reception at the cathouse, since practically no other gringos ever went there. None in Tampico then. But I didn't have to worry, especially when I talked a little Spanish. The girls were lovely–that wonderful blend of Spanish and Mexican-Indian that has produced a race of people as fascinating as the Polynesians. As I say, I felt no sense

of guilt. I grew up on the Rio Grande, and visiting cathouses in Mexico had been a part of my cultural pattern for a long, long time.

But I was terrified when Ricardo started driving the streets of Tampico. He drove without lights. At least without headlights. Only dim parking lights. And the street lights were equally dim–or missing entirely. I guess it was part of the wartime hysteria–blackouts on the coast. In Tampico, as in most other old Mexican cities, buildings run smack to the street intersections, so it's blind corner after blind corner. The idea in driving, as demonstrated to me by Ricardo, was to see who could honk loudest as he approached an intersection. The loudest horn won the right-of-way. Ricardo must have had a special horn installed in his car. It was terrific–and he sure stopped cars at intersections, sometimes with only a few feet to spare. But we made it, and I switched from fishing, which is probably only a form of sublimation when practiced as a sport, to an entirely different kind of sport that doggone sure isn't sublimation of anything. And, for the moment, I forgot the rodeo. The next day it was back to fishing–hanging on again as that dopey spoon wobbled.

One pleasant difference between writing a book and writing articles for magazines is that in a book you can tell the truth when you get skunked–when you, the Great White Fisherman, spend three days fishing a river with thousands of tarpon in it and manage not to catch one. That's "negative" in the opinion of magazine editors. It was particularly embarrassing to me and Dave and Hurt, for all three of us had reputations in the world of tarpon fishing. Pictures of the two in action had appeared in many articles I wrote about

tarpon fishing. And I can admit it here, although I went way around in circles to sort of fog the image of our defeat when I turned out the magazine article. The objective was to do justice to the Panuco. I did.

The third day I had a nice, sociable boat ride with Felix. I let my giant spoon out as far as I could–still no strikes. Felix had two solid strikes, and I was sure that he literally tore the hooks out the way he hit the fish. Dave and Hurt caught nothing, but there would be a return engagement. No river is going to whip down Dave and Hurt and me. We would have gone back in a few weeks except for something known as money, which I have mentioned before. Dave owns and operates a Spanish-language movie house in Brownsville, and he was just pulling out of the dread depression days. Hurt was faced with closing his sporting goods store for the duration–you can't sell tackle and guns and ammunition if you can't get any. And me–I was to get $75, and no expense money, for the magazine article.

I told Felix we would be back the next year. "But we'd like to rent two skiffs," I told him.

"We wouldn't dream of letting you charter boats," he said. "We'll have the same two boats ready."

Oh yes? Over my dead body.

"Felix, I have a flat rule," I said. "The rodeo people can pay for the charter the first time out. The next time, we pay. And we want skiffs–small ones. We'll bring our own motors."

And so it was agreed.

CHAPTER V

MYSTERY TARPON

Dave and I felt a little uneasy as we slid the car-top boat into the Rio Grande and cranked the motor. It was wartime, and pilots of the Civil Air Patrol had a way of buzzing anything or anybody they spotted as they guarded our frontier. I never did find out what they were looking for. Nothing came across the river where we were except wetbacks and bootleggers bringing tequila. But it was buzz, buzz, buzz, as we knew from experience at the mouth of the river. The CAP men, most of them Hollywood expatriates out for a lark, were doing their thing.

We had a tough time getting permission to put boats in the Rio Grande, and we never did manage to get more than tacit understanding from U.S. and Mexico officials that they wouldn't bother us if we didn't cross the center line of the river, thereby invading Mexican territory. For reasons which I still do not understand, we had fished the mouth of the Rio Grande for eight years and not once did we go on up the river and taking a look. We couldn't drive along the bank because there was no road. But we could drive to it at a number of places, on sort of cattle trails through the marsh and brush.

Now and then we had vague reports about some "big white fish" that Mexican *catan* fishermen hung. *Catan* is the Spanish word for gar, and commercial fishermen

caught alligator gars in the river, dried the meat and sold it. Dave loved the stinking stuff, just as he loved dried shrimp. I couldn't take the smell of either.

Sometimes the *catan* fishermen operated near the mouth of the river, where we could watch them. Usually they floated their baits, insides of a rabbit or a calf, out to the gars by using tiny rafts with miniature sails on them. And on rare occasions a tarpon would take hold. Maybe he would straighten out the hook or bust the line. Maybe the fisherman would land him. If he did, he would dry the tarpon, salting it good, and hang it on the wall for future use. Most Mexicans living along rivers in that country like the flesh of tarpon. It isn't eaten in this country. I've tried eating a small one–pretty crummy and a lot of bones where bones have no business being.

Anyway, we had never bothered to drive across the salt flats and then through the brush to the few spots where the river could be reached between Brownsville and its mouth. It was waste country, populated mainly by feral donkeys that the late Snake King of Brownsville used to shoot to get meat for his lions until some smart cookie rounded the donkeys all up and drove them into Mexico, where there was a market for them. But after we got back from Tampico we decided to do what we should have done eight years earlier–explore the river right there at home.

Now Dave and I, feeling a trifle like Columbus approaching land, rounded the big bend and saw something down in the next bend that we thought was a mighty school of mullet playing games.

They weren't mullet–they were tarpon.

It seemed that there were millions of them, although in retrospect I'll settle for a few thousand. We saw a lot more tarpon in the Panuco, but not so many crowded into such a small spot.

A hole dug out by the Rio Grande current as it rounds a bend may be two hundred feet across, seldom more. Such a hole in the Panuco may be almost a half mile across. So in the Rio Grande the fish jam up close together. And we *knew* the tarpon would gang up on our lures, so we leaned forward, trying to help the five-horse motor push the boat faster.

That's what we thought.

What actually happened was quite different–the tarpon calmly and insultingly ignored our lures. All the heroic things we figured on doing to those Panuco tarpon, once we got back there with our gear, might not happen. For a solid hour Dave and I cast, and the fish were so jammed up that one would occasionally throw water on us as he flipped his tail on the downslide. One actually touched the boat! A real insult if I ever had one. Time and again Dave and I would *hit* a tarpon as he rolled, just for the hell of it. We tried working the lure fast and working it slow. We tried going down eight or ten feet then working the lure up. Dave even tried a trick we had used before, with fine results on several occasions–a trick I'll explain later in detail. He reversed the metal lip on the bottom of the plug's snout and brought the lure back riding the surface, fast. Nothing worked. We never even had a bump, and changing lures, from mullet type to shrimp type to spoons and back to mullet type made no difference.

A big tarpon rolled about fifty feet away and Dave let go with a mighty cast, singing out, “Take that, you bastard.” All Dave did was foul his line–a real mare’s nest that took ten minutes to pick out. And all that time tarpon slapping the water and giving us the cold, fish eye.

“I’m stuck on the damn bottom,” Dave said, when he finally got the snarl out and started reeling in. “Now I’ll lose a plug, and without even getting a strike...hey...hey man! That’s not the bottom. It’s MOVING!”

I just sat there with my mouth open staring as a big tarpon came up from way down deep and burst into the air. He had plenty of slack, so he was able to fling the plug back, right at us in in anger it seemed. Then he slapped the water with his tail and went on back down to his “roost” on the bottom.

“What the hell...” I said, as I started reeling in my lure. I had let it sink to the bottom while I watched Dave’s tarpon in action. Now when I reeled in I got resistance–and *moving* resistance.

“They’re feeding on bottom,” Dave said, casting out, on the other side of the boat from my line, and letting his lure sink.

Whatever took my lure turned loose–I was too surprised to sink the hook–so I reeled in and cast out, watching line flow from the reel as the lure sank–all the way to the bottom. When the line went slack, indicating the lure was on the bottom, I reeled in a bit, to take out the slack, then gently nudged the lure. Up the line came the message I’d been praying for–an answering nudge. I nudged harder, and the tarpon took hold. He seemed as deliberate about taking the lure as a man taking a bite of steak. I hit him as hard as I

dared with that 20-pound-test line. And stuck him. And at the same instant Dave began making those funny noises that some fishermen make when the stars shine.

A mystery was solved.

Both of us had a tarpon on. They were pretty rugged and going in opposite directions. Nobody could help anybody with the boat, something you need real badly when you tie into a six-footer with the casting gear we use. There was small call for worry. Both of us lost our fish. You lose plenty of tarpon when you cast plugs. Who cares? We never kill them anyway.

Dopey as it may seem, Dave and I sat talking for a bit, as though victory had been achieved and we could enjoy all the goodies of a glorious fishing session without hurrying.

"I should have listened to those *catan* fishermen," Dave said. "They've been telling me for years that tarpon in the river feed on some kind of great big river shrimp that stay on the bottom."

"Now I know why we caught nothing in the Panuco," I added.

"Did you see a mullet there," Dave asked.

"Not one."

"They're feeding on the bottom on those shrimp or whatever they are," Dave said.

"Well, shall we tie into them," I said, as I switched from a mullet-type lure (one vaguely resembling a mullet in shape and action) to a heavier lure that is supposed to look like shrimp, at least to a fish.

"We'll murder the Panuco," Dave said, as he cast out.

It sure seemed crazy, sitting there, firing up a cigarette waiting for a plug to settle on the bottom. Still-fishing with plugs. You figure it out, but we both had strikes. I lost mine on the first jump, Dave stuck his, a neat five-footer, and I maneuvered the boat as he whipped it down, eased it alongside, and took out the hook. We both took part in that operation, a very sound idea, as we knew from experience. We used only a short one-hand gaff, not the big pole that most tarpon fishermen use. And we were careful to gaff the tarpon only in the edge of its bony lower jaw, so we wouldn't injure it. You hold a tarpon's head out of the water alongside a dinky boat such as the one we were using, and you might be in trouble if he suddenly sets sail when pliers touch the inside of his mouth. So Dave got a good grip on the jaw with long pliers that we carried for the purpose, and I worked the hooks out with regular pliers, being careful not to hurt the fish.

No. 1 in the boat–or at it.

I'm sorry we kept no record of what happened that day. We had a strike, or at least a nudge, almost every cast. We hung half those that took hold solidly enough to get at least one jump. And we actually boated and released nine tarpon, ranging from a shade over three feet to one almost six feet.

The ratio of fish landed to tarpon hooked well enough to give forth a jump is extremely small, even when you've got a tight line at the time of the strike. It was much smaller that day because of the inevitable bow in the line from fishing on the bottom. Sure, you almost always get a bow in the line when a big sail or marlin takes off with the bait in its mouth. He may be three hundred yards away when he swallows the bait and

you sink the hook when he makes his first jump, but the *drag* of three hundred yards of line is enough to sink a hook when you give it a boost with the rod. Just for fun, let out three hundred yards of line in a rough circle and try *landing* it with featherweight tackle. We had no such advantage. Tarpon were taking hold at the bottom, in about twenty-five feet of water. They weren't more than forty or fifty feet from us horizontally on most strikes. And they came straight up. Drag on that line bow did no good. So plenty of them kicked free.

Who cared? If you manage to get seventy tarpon in the air in one morning of fishing (we quit at noon), what more do you want? It was the wildest tarpon session I have ever experienced if you judge by the number of strikes and number of jumps–and the time span. Usually your wild bursts of action are of short duration. We quit that day because of sheer weariness. Yes, I've heard and read thousands of times that old axiom that no *real* angler, no Great White Fisherman, ever quits while the fish are striking. I've done it thousands of times, especially when I was fishing for speckled trout (weakfish to you) or snook. So after five hours of battle we sat in the boat, meditating, surveying our sadly battered lures, sorrowing over two lost lures–and making threats against the Panuco. And I was thinking about the next morning, when Hurt and I would be out at the same spot. Dave was kind enough to claim that he couldn't get away from his business the next morning. We all knew that three men had no business casting for tarpon from that ten-foot, ninety-pound boat.

"I wonder what Hurt's going to say when we tell him," Dave said.

"He won't believe us," I said.

“Think we ought to catch one and take it in as proof,” Dave asked, and I could see the sparkle coming back into his eyes.

“No. He’ll believe we caught tarpon if we tell him. What he won’t believe is that he can’t catch them the way we always do–that he’ll have to still fish on the bottom. Taking one in wouldn’t prove a thing.”

“I guess you’re right,” Dave said. “I’d sure like to be here and watch his face...”

“Okay, we can crowd in...”

“No. I’ll let you tell me about it.”

“Anyway, they may hit some other way tomorrow,” I added.

“I’d bet on that,” Dave said.

And, as things turned out, he would have lost...at least for a time.

CHAPTER VI

THE TRUE BELIEVER

Eric Hoffer hadn't turned out that pile of pseudo philosophy at the time Hurt and I went back to the Rio Grande, in 1942, but I can say this for Hurt–he is the kind of man that will quit being a "true believer," Eric Hoffer style, and face reality even when it doesn't fit into all his preconceptions. And he doggone sure was no believer when Dave and I undertook, later in our day of glory, to convince him that the tarpon wouldn't touch anything except a lure on the bottom, maybe lying still. And sure enough, some did nudge lures that weren't even moving–sort of rooting them up. Those crazy river shrimp must be the slowest creatures in the sea.

Since our whitewashing at the Panuco, Hurt had done what he realized was the inevitable–closed his sporting goods for the duration. But he moved most of what he had, especially his precious plugs, along with a dwindling supply of shotgun shells, into a little room in back of a print shop. He held forth there a major part of each day, and it remained a hangout for those of us who hunted and fished. So that's where Dave and I found him. A couple of other men were in the store. I didn't want them horning in on things until after Hurt and I made our trip, so I waited until they left.

One left in quite a huff. Hurt refused to sell him a couple of lures, even though the man was willing to pay double the price. "I sure won't come in here any more," the man said. Hurt sort of smiled.

When he moved his dwindling stock into that little room, Hurt no longer sought business of people in general. What he did was nurse that stuff along and sell it, little by little, to those of us who had been his regular customers before war changed things. And by regular customer I mean people who wouldn't go to some chain store and buy a certain plug that was being sold at cut rate just to get customers in the store.

Hurt never sold anything at cut rate.

Now he still kept the same old prices, plus a tiny percentage increase because of overhead, on the gear he had, and he sold it to us at those prices. He wouldn't sell a plug for ten times the price to some customer who had bought stuff at cut rate. And he wouldn't let any of us–his regulars–overstock. He was particularly careful on .410 shotgun shells, which all of us used in hunting quail and white-winged doves–on rare occasions mourning doves. We hunted them only when white-wings were scarce. And we were careful. The limit on white-wings was twelve, and I would take only fifteen shells. It was the same with lures. If you chose a good leader, a plug for specks or reds will last almost indefinitely. It's not that way with tarpon lures, especially those with the crummy, soft-metal hooks that we were getting.

So when the others were gone we told Hurt. Dave and I were watching. Hurt was trying not to show any reaction, but his questions were a tipoff.

"You tried letting it go down pretty deep, then working it back up fast?"

"Sure," Dave said. "And slow and in between. You name it, we tried it."

"How long did you rest the plug on the bottom?"

"Maybe three or four minutes," I said. "plenty of time to fire up a smoke and meditate; we had to let him find it."

I was pouring it on a bit–so was Dave. And it was easy to see that Hurt was not a true believer–yet.

Finally Hurt said, "What are we waiting on?"

"I'll pick you up at five in the morning," I said.

"I'll have breakfast ready."

On the run to the Tarpon Hole, as we decided to name it, I saw something I had not noticed the previous day–something that definitely worried me. I saw mullet. This could be bad–and it *was* bad I realized as we neared that spectacular gathering of tarpon. For now and then we could see a strike–a tarpon definitely lunging at, and probably catching, something at the surface. I would a hundred times rather hang a tarpon striking at the surface, when I can feel the jolt rattle my arms just as the plug hits the water. In contrast, still-fishing on the bottom is pretty dreary, until the tarpon surfaces. But for now I had visions of all that stuff Dave and I were explaining blowing into busted bubbles. Doggone slim chance of making a true believer out of Hurt.

In a river such as the Rio Grande, mullet move in shallow, slightly murky water, hugging shores or sandbars. It's protection against tarpon. But when mullet are moving upstream or downstream, and the silly things seem to be almost always on the move except on grass flats of a bay, they have to run the gauntlet at the bends. For suddenly the shallow shore isn't shallow any more but changes to a bluff. So the mullet must cross to

the other side of the river. And he has to race right smack over those and hundreds of greedy tarpon. Numbers alone save him–or at least his species. For tarpon deal out deadly carnage at such times.

So as I cut the motor and let the little boat drift up to the tarpon (there was no breeze yet, so the anchor wasn't necessary), a tarpon blasted at the surface, Hurt put a plug on the spot–and BINGO! My theories were shot to hell in one blazing blast. I was so damn disgusted I just sat there for a spell, refusing to even watch the tarpon on his second jump, although I sure could hear him. Then I heard Hurt. "You going to help me or not," he asked, and there was anxiety in his voice.

I quickly started the motor and took after his tarpon, a real hefty female that would need chasing. The chase wasn't very long. The tarpon straightened out one of those putty-like hooks and kept going, headed for the Gulf of Mexico for a rest until she got over the soremouth. But it was the same doggone thing when we got back to the tarpon. Cast–bingo. Cast–bingo. Who could complain?

I could. But I didn't say a word, and Hurt was gentleman enough not to gloat, not even flashing an "understanding" smile at me. Those infernal tarpon kept striking that way for more than a half hour, although we didn't spend all that time casting. We were battling fish.

I landed a four-footer, the size tarpon I would pick ideal for the kind of casting tackle I had. I boated him and eased out the hook in about ten minutes. Then Hurt got stuck to a five-footer, and it took longer to bring that one alongside. Even though we quit using the gaff, since just getting a grip on the tip of the lower jaw with the big pliers was

quicker, it still took time to get the fish up to the boat and get the hooks out, but I knew Hurt was suffering. Sure, he loves to battle tarpon, but if plugs had been expendable, I felt sure he would have broken free, deliberately, after he got about all the jumps he was going to get–then hurried back to enjoy the blast at the surface again.

And do no moaning to me about the "cruelty" of letting a poor tarpon swim on off with a plug in its mouth. The tarpon gets rid of it. What he can't get rid of is something he has swallowed–a mullet impaled on a hook, for example.

All of a sudden things were quiet, except for the almost constant light noise–occasionally a big one–of a tarpon rolling while getting air. I studied the river carefully and saw that the mullet were gone.

Maybe all wasn't lost, after all. But I played it cool. I did just what Hurt was doing–continued casting my lure (mullet type), and working it the conventional way. Very near the top at times, by holding my rod tip high. Deeper now and then by letting it sink a bit and working it in slowly. I tried all the tricks. So did Hurt. Nothing, absolutely nothing. The expression on Hurt's face became grim. But he still wasn't a true believer, Mr. Hoffer.

At last I switched to the shrimp type, heavier lure Dave and I had used the day before. We had found them better for this crazy fishing. I let the lure go to the bottom, rested it for a moment, then nudged it. Here came that sympathetic, understanding nudge being relayed to me up the line. I nudged again, being sure to take up slack before I did. That time I got a pretty solid rap, and I stuck him for keeps. When he surfaced and

shimmied, the hook still held, and Hurt quickly put down his tackle and started for the stern of the boat.

"I can handle him," I said. "Go ahead and cast."

It was only a three-footer, so I had much more line, about two hundred yards, than I needed to handle him. Hurt cast out, all right. The same lure I had worked the same way. Converting the nonbelievers can be a rugged job, as devout church people well know.

I didn't tell Hurt how I hooked that tarpon. I didn't have to. He is one of the most alert persons I have ever known. He can see a quail behind him. So he knew. Yet there he was, casting the same lure, working it the same way.

I got the little fellow in and released him without any help from Hurt. You can hold a three-footer steady with big pliers. Then I cast out again, let the lure sink to the bottom, fired a smoke, then nudged. "I'm here, pal," came the message from below. I struck him–and when he busted the surface, Hurt put down his tackle, gave forth a heavy sigh, and said, "Okay, I'm a convert. Need any help?"

"Yes, I might...he's pretty...forget it."

He was gone.

I waited on Hurt–who had been waiting on me. I let him have the field, and he got just what I *knew* he would–a strike...by still fishing on the bottom with a lure.

"You win," Hurt said. "Now chase him!"

I had to, for Hurt had managed to get latched to a six-footer. Children, mothers, grandparents, uncles, aunts, great uncles–hell, they were all gathered in that hole. The

clan. It's not always that way in the world of tarpon, fortunately. Many times you find small ones and nothing else. Seldom do you find only the giants, which is okay with me.

Chasing that tarpon began to present something of a problem, for he was heading straight for the Mexican side of the river. Even though the deep part of that hole may have been no more than two hundred feet across, the river was much wider there than along the moderately straight stretches. And on the Mexican side of the river was a member of what the Mexicans call *Rurales*–border guards. It is customary in Texas to refer to *Rurales* as counterparts of Texas Rangers. This may have been true in earlier days, when the primary function of the Rangers was to guard the state's frontiers against Indians and Mexicans. But the *Rurales* today are still pretty much border guards, the Texas Rangers are something entirely different–something that should have been phased out with the passing of the frontier.

Well, that Mexican river guard, with a big, bone-handle Peacemaker draped on one hip, just sat slantwise on his horse, coldly eyeing us as the infernal tarpon headed straight for him.

Don't cross the center of the river...don't cross the center of the river..., I thought.

What is the center of a river? If it's the center of the current, then the center line was way over close to the man on horseback.

Hurt had about two hundred yards of line, but you get a wrong impression if you think the line is effective right to the end. When you get down to twenty or so yards left on the reel spool, you can't judge the pressure you're putting on.

That river guard sure looked grim. So I sang out, as we hightailed it right behind the tarpon, "*Tenemos permiso para pescar aqui*." We have permission to fish here. The guard said nothing–just stared. Then the tarpon jumped and headed back right at us, and as I swung the dinky boat about and ran from the fish I heard the guard laughed at us being chased by a fish.

I couldn't go fast enough to outrun the fish. The five-horse motor, which actually delivered only a little more than three horsepower, wouldn't plane the boat with me and Hurt and our gear in it. The tarpon got all the slack he needed, and when he felt tension fade he jumped and threw the plug. At the end of the day, Hurt hung and landed four tarpon, and I caught three.

"I still have trouble believing it," he said. "But you win. I'm not doing any arguing."

"We going to tell the Great American Public," I asked.

"How about saying nothing for a couple of weeks until we can have the hole to ourselves for a few more trips," he said. "You can't always tell–those tarpon might get wise if they see enough lures."

I thought little of his remark at the time. I had plenty of chance later to meditate on the soundness of his prediction.

CHAPTER VII

CONQUEST OF THE PANUCO

They laughed when we sat down at the piano. They didn't laugh when we began playing tunes on a fishing line. No kidding, you can play tunes on a fishing line if it's tight enough. I fished for several years with a screwball trumpet player who loved to thump out little tunes on the line. He tightened or eased off tension to get different notes and sometimes he got sore as hell if the fish disturbed his tune by making a run. The guy was nuts but he was a lot of fun while he lasted.

The other contestants in the second annual Tampico Tarpon Rodeo watched carefully as we got into two little skiffs and latched on our three-horse motors. They examined our tackle and were puzzled–like the guide at Topolobampo, on Mexico's west coast, who tried to hoist a 12-pound snook into the boat with my 10-pound-test line. He was puzzled. He wanted to know why I used such a line. The regulars, both gringo and Mexican, shook their heads in disbelief as they fingered the 20-pound-test lines and looked at the dinky (to them) reels with no brakes and the long, fragile, whippy rods.

And this time we had plugs–the right kind. It's true they were a bit battered. And as a precaution against further destruction by the big ones in the Panuco, we had wired the two sets of treble hooks together and then attached the wire to the eye on top (or in front) of the plug. At least we wouldn't lose any hooks unless the line broke. And we

had dug out a few remaining Swedish steel hooks that we had left and put them on our plugs for the occasion. For some odd reason, all the other contestants in the rodeo seemed to think it wouldn't be quite proper to do anything but drag that Pflueger spoon for three days. So away they cruised, and we buzzed slowly along, one boat heading upstream, one downstream.

There were four of us–Dave Young, Hurt Batsell, a Braniff Airways pilot named Bill Longino, and I. Bill fished with Hurt, Dave with me. Dave is not competitive, and I quickly adjust to his attitude. If we are wading shallow water near a bay shore, tossing out "floating spoons" for speckled trout, we don't bother to count the catch. Hurt is competitive, and I adjust to his attitude. I don't like myself when I'm competitive.

Dave and I headed upstream–maybe because we remembered the shady little cantina with the fine tequila. The four of us didn't fish the same spot because we figured that too much commotion might scare some of the fish. And there would be no foul-up of lines, something that can easily happen when boats are close together and tarpon are quite active.

As we approached the tarpon in the bend we could see that they were merely rolling–no blasting of mullet at the surface. We figured working at or near the surface would be merely a waste of time, so when I cut the motor and we drifted in range, both of us cast out the heavy (seven-eighths ounce) shrimp type plugs and let them go to the bottom. We cast into the wind, what little there was. That made it easier to keep a tight line as the boat drifted slowly through the tarpon. And casting the other way we would

have drifted over our plugs, which may or may not be such a hot idea, something I'll discuss later.

Both of us started to light cigarettes–the tarpon didn't give us time. Evidently the slight movement of the boat gave the plugs just the right amount of nudge, and here came the message up the line. From that moment on, it was happy day. And I was sure in a mood to gloat, something I seldom do. That time the memory of the whitewash on our first trip came sharply to mind, reinforced by a few comments I had heard about the three "Great White Fishermen" from north of the Rio Grande being skunked. We couldn't keep a plug on the bottom a full minute without feeling a nudge–then a strike. These tarpon took hold quicker than those in the Rio Grande.

You can see an airborne tarpon almost a mile away, and soon we began attracting an audience. The Mexican anglers were more curious than the gringo, most of whom at least knew about casting plugs for tarpon. Also the Mexicans were more polite.

Maybe Dave would be doing battle with a fish, and I'd be handling the boat. One of those river launches would stop some distance away, the fishermen careful not to foul our line. Then when Dave boated–or lost–the tarpon, the fishermen would ease on up and start asking questions. I let Dave do the talking when the questioning was in Spanish.

Those Mexican fishermen were positive that we were using *carnada*–live or once live bait. Even when we showed them our plugs they were skeptical, for they had watched us (evidently with the aid of binoculars) and asked how we could make fish strike a piece of wood lying still on the bottom.

"I'll show you," Dave said–not in a bragging way at all, for he isn't that type, but just with confidence that events justified. So he cast out, let the lure sink, said a few words to our Mexican visitors, then nudged the plug. Up he came! I gloried in the way the fishermen talked at such times–and I sure was happy I could understand what they were saying.

Gloat, Stilwell! It's your turn. I did.

The fireworks were continuous. But we were losing more fish on the first jump than we did in Tarpon Hole, mainly because they were bigger. The tarpon were mangling those shrimp type lures, made of wood. Later fine plastic plugs of the same type came out. But we'd get a plug back with hooks jerked loose, dangling from the leader wire we had used to fasten things together. I think the wood was cedar. First the tarpon would bust off the heavy varnish or lacquer or whatever kind of paint was on the plug. Then they'd split the plugs. I finally switched to an old reliable, a mullet-type plug that was old but durable–and had good hooks. And I managed to boat one.

"He's over five feet," Dave said, as he held the fish alongside after removing the hooks. "Want to keep him and haul him in?"

"Hell no," I said. "I don't want to win any prizes. I just want to show somebody that we can catch a fish."

By that time, 1943, I had decided that I would never compete in another fishing rodeo, at least not one in Texas. I had seen so much crummy lack of sportsmanship put on display by "sportsmen" that I didn't want to even be in a rodeo again. That one in the Panuco would be my last. And it was quite different from the typical Texas rodeo–

and different from the fishing roundups of today in Texas. For in our fishing contests a lot of valuable prizes are awarded. And if you want to see the sportsman at his worst, watch him as he competes for a $5,000 boat or some other such prize. In the Tampico rodeo the awards were cups–that's all. And they went to the *biggest* tarpon, not the greatest number or the most pounds.

I knew the odds were all against our bringing in any tarpon big enough to win a prize. The way to land a monster is to sink the mighty hook of a Pflueger Record spoon all the way through the bone of his jaw and work him over with heavy tackle. We didn't have that kind of gear, and we didn't want it. We were fishing for fun, and enjoying it more and more as word passed along the river, from boat to boat, and the curious began assembling in larger numbers to see the "crazy Americans who are catching tarpon with plugs on the bottom."

Those curious soon began really bugging us, especially my fellow Americans. They figured that if we could catch tarpon in that school, then they could. So they began trolling in that school, then they could. So they began trolling through the school, then circling it, coming close and closer to us. At times they threatened to cut our lines, which they could not see until a tarpon jumped. We motioned for them to move away. They ignored us. They had a right to get into the middle of the action. Sure they did. But after thirty minutes of catching nothing–and listening to our tarpon rattling gills–they would reluctantly cruise on off. And here would come more fishermen. They were like Hurt when we took off for Tarpon Hole. They were not true believers. Give them three days and see.

Several times Dave and I quit fishing because of the clutter of boats, and one of those times we made the run on up to the cantina for a tequila and a bit of rest. The bartender, Benito, told us proudly that he now knew about American money and he would be glad to take any that we had. We didn't have any–and no one-peso bills torn in half, either. The Mexican government had stopped that. Then back to the school of tarpon for another session.

That day Dave and I kept a record. I wanted to know. We had a total of a hundred and twenty-seven bumps at the bottom, had sixty-three tarpon hooked well enough to get at least one jump, and actually boated eight. Dave caught one that I'm sure was over five feet, and I urged him to take it in and enter it.

"They need them for pictures for the *turistas*," I said.

"Let somebody else lug dead tarpon in," Dave said. He doesn't think any more of rodeos than I do–he fished with me in two or three rodeos in Texas before our Tampico trip.

So we eased up to the dock shortly after one o'clock with nothing to enter. Yet the anglers were gathered, or gathering, there to talk to us–maybe to by some of our "magic" baits. And you might bear in mind that there are situations in which people there at the fishing hole really consider a lure as a bit of magic. Dave and Hurt and I ran into that situation on a trip years ago at the mouth of the Soto la Marina River, which is north of Tampico. When we began hauling in fine redfish by casting spoons the native fishermen gathered around us and began muttering and Dave said, "They're getting upset.

They think these spoons are magic and that we're going to take away all their fish. We'd better do something."

"Tell them they can have the fish," Hurt said. That eased their worries.

And so they wanted to buy our lures–I was offered twenty dollars American for one plug, the plug I had on my line when we tied up at the dock. We told the anglers, most of them Mexicans, that the plugs would not stand the pressure applied with their heavy tackle.

"Then how about buying that whole outfit," a Mexican angler said to me, pointing to a spare rig in the boat. We always take spare rigs in such fishing if we are a long way from home. The man offered me three hundred dollars for the rig.

"I can't sell it to you," I said. "I can't get any more because they're not being made. The war."

They didn't believe us and I sensed the hostility. We had something special that we were hoarding so we could show up everybody else.

"And spoons are best for the big tarpon," I added.

Sure, we would have spread some lures around as a gesture of international goodwill if we could have replaced them. The only others available were locked in Hurt's little semi-private tackle shop.

After a leisurely early afternoon lunch and a siesta, we joined the bullfest at Felix's tackle store, and the first thing I noticed was a completely bare wall where there had been, the previous year, a big display of monster plugs. They were made of wood,

then had an oddball gadget attached to the lower part of the snout, a piece of metal bent so that it would make the plug wobble. And they were loaded with gang hooks. The things were originally made for muskies, I was told. And when we examined them the previous year we knew they wouldn't work if trolled from those launches, because they would simply spin at that speed. We *knew*. We had tried them in the Rio Grande–just reeling in fast. But all were gone.

"They had bought them all out even before I got back here," Felix said. "They're going to show you fellows up."

"They've already done that," I said. "I counted twenty-one tarpon on display out there. We didn't bring any in."

Bill and Hurt, fishing downstream, had about the same luck we did. Continuous action, but nothing really big. A couple of five-footers, four smaller ones.

I didn't make any comment about the lures spinning, even when Felix tapped the top of a package containing six of those plugs.

"I phoned from the clubhouse and had these put aside for myself."

The plugs wouldn't even sink–had to fasten a sinker on. And they were worthless for casting, unless you had sturdier gear than we did, for they weighed around two and a half ounces each compared to our seven-eighths-ounce plugs. When most of the other people were gone, I said, "Felix, would you like to fish with us? I've got a spare casting rig and you can use any of my plugs you want to."

"Thanks," he said, "but I'll work them over with these plugs."

"They won't troll at that speed, Felix," I said.

"Why not?"

"They'll spin–just wind up your line."

I wasn't getting through to him. You seldom do when a fisherman gets that gleam in his eye–a fisherman gazing upon fine beautiful plugs, big enough for the he-man tarpon, the *machos*. Felix reminded me of an old Mexican ballad which goes, "I love to sing into the wind because it brings my songs back to me." I was singing into the wind, and my words were coming back.

We had company at our new tarpon hole the next day–and I say new because Dave and I went downstream that morning, while Bill and Hurt went upstream. I spent more time watching other anglers, those with the big plugs, than I did fishing. We were right–the plugs twisted lines up until getting the kinks out was an irritating job. The angler had to let the line back out in the water with no lure on it. Then here came Felix and his fishing companion–my "pal" Ricardo from the cathouse ventures. The boatman cut the motor and the launch eased up fairly close. I waited.

"Won't work," Felix admitted. "Spins, the way you said."

"Want one of my plugs," I asked. My shrimp-type plugs would not spin, even at a fast clip.

"No thanks," he said. " I know you need them."

"I think you can make that plug work, Felix, if you don't mind a suggestion."

"Fire away," he said.

"Put a sinker on it, cruise upwind past the tarpon, then stop the motor and drift back through them, let the plug go to the bottom and just nudge it if it isn't moving."

He tried it, promptly hung a tarpon, and just as promptly reeled in a plug all crushed with the hooks straightened out. Those hooks wouldn't take the pressure of that heavy tackle unless the angler eased way off on tension and doggone few anglers do that unless they're old hands at the game. Felix tried it again–and reeled in another mangled plug. He gave up.

Then an idea came to me. It was almost impossible to do any casting from the river launch in which Felix and Ricardo were fishing. But there sure was something else that might be done. When the day's fishing was over, at one p.m., after about the same kind of continuous action as on the first day, I talked to my companions about the idea I had in mind for the last day of fishing. "Those guys have been real fine to us..." I started.

"I'd say Ricardo has been *unusually* nice to you," Dave cut in, thinking of the cathouse visits.

"Anyway, suppose I get in with them and have them tow one of our boats along, then they can get in it, one at a time, and really get some action."

I was absolutely certain that Felix and Ricardo would not spend the whole day in that open skiff in the burning sun. The Mexican sportsman demands his comfort.

"I'll let them use my rigs," I said.

"They can have my spare," said Hurt, and Dave volunteered too.

"Can you three fish from one skiff," I asked.

They said they could. The skiffs were heavy and had a broad beam compared to the little cartop boat we used in river fishing for tarpon. My companions also loaned me a few of their precious plugs. Felix and Ricardo were charmed at the idea, so charmed

that decided to cruise a bit farther up the Panuco and find a "new" tarpon hole where they would be alone. As we neared the school I noticed two things: First, the percentage of small tarpon, even as little as two feet, was greater, even though grandma and grandpa did show now and then; second, which meant that they were feeding on mullet.

"I don't think we'll have to fish on the bottom," I told my companions as we rigged our gear. I selected three mullet-type plugs, which are much better when tarpon are hitting at the surface.

"What's the difference in this hole and the others," Felix asked.

"I saw a tarpon hit a mullet. Let's try it near the top."

We did, and the tarpon banged into those plugs. Hard!

Before we started fishing I handed each of my companions a couple of the knitted thumb stalls that we use in tarpon fishing. There were no internal drag in our reels. I noticed both Ricardo and Felix put the thumb stalls away in pockets. They dug them out and put them on in a hurry after the first strike. That sizzling line will burn a hole in your thumb if you press too hard. In a way I guess it was fortunate they didn't put the thumb stalls on at first, for they clamped down so hard the line might have busted. They sure let go in a hurry. I had told Felix and Ricardo in advance that they had small chance of landing a truly big one with our gear.

"Let the others win the cups," Felix said. "Man, all I want is some action–the kind you fellows have had."

Tarpon struck at the surface for about an hour, during which time the three of us, fishing from the skiff with an outboard motor latched onto the stern panel, brought five

tarpon to gaff. One, caught by Felix, was over five feet, so he decided to keep it and add to the total catch for the rodeo. Then the mullet moved on–going upstream–and we began still-fishing on the bottom with plugs.

"Sure feels silly," Ricardo said.

"Who cares if–hey, something's nudging my plug," Felix said. Ricardo and I reeled in quickly, and Felix hung and boated another tarpon, but it didn't go quite five feet.

What delighted me was hanging into and landing a couple of fish only a shade over three feet. I decided that on my next trip to the Panuco I would really explore. You find smaller fish way up some rivers, and I wanted them. Then came grandpa nosing around–and Ricardo stuck him solid with the real fine, Swedish hooks on that old plug of mine.

Felix and I reeled in and I got the motor going in a hurry. It had plenty of power , so I could maneuver the boat as Ricardo did a truly beautiful job of handling the fish. He had learned so much battling jumpers from fishing for sails off Mexico's west coast. He whipped that one down. And as near as we could figure, measuring with my rod, which was seven feet long, the big silver king would go about six feet, four inches. A trophy tarpon, maybe. And it did win a trophy, although not the top one. I can't remember the exact system they used in that rodeo to determine the prize fish, probably because I never brought in a fish and was embarrassed about asking. But I think they added the length, in inches, to half the weight, in pounds. Anyway, a fat lady tarpon won top prize for the day–but Ricardo lugged off the cup for third prize.

That night Ricardo and Felix and my companions and I gathered for our farewell dinner at the wonderful Tampico Club restaurant–and that's all it is, a restaurant. We had a little going-away gift for Felix. I told my companions I was going to give Felix four of my precious plugs, so each of them pitched in two more plugs. We proudly spread them out on the table in front of Felix, but he immediately covered them with a napkin.

"Man, those rodeo fishermen would murder me to get these. Don't ever say a word."

He gave two of the plugs to Ricardo.

"We just couldn't do anything about rods and reels and lines to go with them, Felix," I started.

"Do no worrying. I know a place in Mexico City where I can get what I need–from a pilot for *Compania Mexicanca*."

Compania Mexicana de Aviacion is a Mexican airline, originally part of Pan American and still a subsidiary. Some of the pilots, who flew to seaports often, picked up tackle of various kinds now and then.

I felt real good about the way things worked out. Felix had been the perfect host. And, of course, Ricardo had been my *companero* in certain delightful extracurricular activities. You can feel that way about your hosts if you don't deadhead–if you're under no obligation from the beginning. So you feel bighearted when you release your grip on some "killer plugs" that are in short supply. And so, Panuco, hail and farewell. Thou didst meet thy equals. And memories of the shameful water haul the previous year no longer caused pain.

CHAPTER VIII

BAY OF THE IGUANAS

The only disappointment about our trip to Carmen was the Southern Cross. I had never seen it before, and I more or less expected something spectacular. That dim “little” constellation wasn’t a third as interesting as the iguanas.

Carmen is “around the bend” of the Gulf of Mexico, a short distance east of the southernmost tip. The Mexicans call the waters there Bahia de Campeche–Bay of Campeche. Americans call it the Gulf of Campeche. The coastline at Carmen runs east and west, and I never adjusted to that, not even on later trips. I’m too firmly conditioned to the coastline running north and south, as it does along the Texas coast and the northern coast of Mexico.

Tarpon and other fish at Carmen had seen practically no artificial lures. Only resident of the town who used lures was an expatriate Englishman named Cecil Bronson who settled there many years before and started an import-export business. Times sure change. Once there was a saying among archaeologists that you could go to the remotest corner of the earth to start a new dig and find a message from some “Humperdink.” German archaeologists did a lot of pioneering.

Then for a long time, while the British Empire flourished, British sportsmen followed the flag, and you could go to a remote spot and find an Englishman with the

inevitable fly rod. If there were no trout, he would plant some. In fact, Britishers did that in some of the mountain streams in Mexico. Now, of course, you can't escape your fellow American, no matter where you go.

It was difficult concentrating on tarpon during my first visit to Carmen because huge snook and barracuda kept attracting my attention–busting my lures. And there were dozens of fish of other kinds worthy of attention, since the big bay there, called Laguna de Terminos, is a fantastic fish trap. It is called the Laguna de Terminos (endings) because two big rivers and half a dozen smaller ones empty into it, bringing a bountiful supply of plankton and other food for small fish out of the tropical jungles of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The main rivers are the Canelaria and the Grijalva. Unfortunately, we never did manage to go up them. They were far from our base of operations, and our oddball boat couldn't go faster–or slower–than five miles an hour. But the Englishman said there were plenty of tarpon in the rivers, including babies on up them a distance, and also snook even farther upstream. And plenty of *pargo* around the mangroves lining the streams near the bay.

There was more, much more–countless millions of fine white shrimp, which my fellow Americans would soon be catching by the hundreds of tons. And there were speckled trout (weakfish), Bronson said, although I never saw any. I did see what I went there to see–thousands and thousands of tarpon. And I caught what I wanted to catch–tarpon and snook and big barracuda and pargo (a kind of snapper) and other game.

Snook look and act much the same as tarpon. They are lean and long and silvery, but are easily distinguishable from tarpon because of a black line along each side, from

gill flap to tail. They even have the typical underslung lower jaw of the tarpon. And they come boiling in the air just as a tarpon does, once they feel the hook. Real battlers. Snook get as big as seventy or eighty pounds, although I've never caught any much larger that thirty, which is plenty of gamefish–and plenty of fine eating fish. That's one big difference between the two, snook are first-rate food fish. And this fact is contributing to lean days for the fish.

There is a close similarity in the range and feeding habits of the two fish. Both go up rivers–snook a bit farther than tarpon. In fact, there is a fish, perhaps just a breed, of snook in Mexico called the river snook. It is heavier and darker colored on top. It goes back to saltwater only to spawn, spending the rest of its life in rivers. The coastal fish, in contrast, is leaner and lighter on the back. We call him a tide-runner.

Carmen is at the western end of an island, and we made the thirty-mile trip to the eastern end of the island in an ancient Ford, weaving through a jungle of coconut palms. Then we crossed the two-mile-wide inlet and settled in a fishing village called Aguada. The name comes from the Spanish *aqua*, meaning water. A tiny trickle of fresh water runs into the big bay near the village.

We slept on air mattresses on a cement floor in a home at the village. Bronson had made arrangements for the room and food. He knew my companions on the trip, Dr. Roy B. Dean and Bink Goodrich, both of Mexico City. I was living in Mexico City then, gathering material for a book on fishing in Mexico, published the following year, 1948. Bink and Doc said I should go to Carmen, so we went. And the memory lingers on, for Carmen at that time was untouched by Gringo hands except those of Bink and Doc,

American expatriates, and Bronson, English expatriate. Only souvenir from the activities there a few years earlier of some American military people, particularly engineers, was the paved strip at the airfield–and that cement floor in the home at Aguada.

Some officer had set up a fishing headquarters there. So you couldn't say it was virgin fishing, which wasn't any particular shock to me, since I've run into that kind of fishing hundreds of times in my wanderings around Mexico before the Nordic Horde started south. And I mean freshwater fishing as well as saltwater. I had been the first gringo to fish way up in some little mountain lake where huge rainbows fought for the right to get hooked.

It took us five hours to cross the two-mile inlet. No we didn't have motor trouble. We had fish trouble. Every time somebody let a lure over the side of our dopey boat a fish took it. A tarpon, a snook, a barracuda, a thirty-pound pargo. So it was stop the boat and man the guns.

Chato, our guide, saved a twenty-pound barracuda for eating purposes. He wrapped it in a wet sack and put it in the shade. We could eat what the Mexicans call *bacalao,* and they're referring to the dish, not the kind of fish in it. The Spanish call codfish *bacalao*–in Mexico the dish is called that, and it doggone sure isn't codfish, for they don't move into Mexican waters.

Doc and Bink, who knew the layout, had Chato move just inside the submerged reef that extended across most of the mouth of the inlet. That's where we started raising big barracuda and pargo–by casting, not trolling. The barracuda is another jumper–the

kind of fish I love. And for plenty of reasons, one of which was demonstrated that day. The jumpers high-tail it for open water and fight like a man. Fish that don't jump dig for obstacles–and so the *pargo* were cutting our lines on shell and dead coral in the reef.

During my later years of fishing I practically abandoned fish that would not jump–all except the weakfish and his much larger cousins, the *totuava* and *corvina* of Mexico's west coast. Although the weakfish in general seldom jump, a big one is almost certain to come to the surface and make a sort of popping sound as he shows his snout momentarily and jerks back down. And they don't burrow into the barnacle-encrusted growth, such as mangrove, that line many waters along Mexico's coastlines.

Since we were using tarpon tackle, we were able to handle some fairly large pargos in spite of their efforts to dig in. I noted the big difference between this snapper and the red snapper that is so popular among Texas fishermen. The Carmen snapper is built more like a redfish, and is a pretty good battler once you keep him clear of obstacles. The red snapper–well, I've caught a few and you can have them. You must use a mighty weight to get a shrimp, or even a lure, down to them (shark will take it if it doesn't go down fast), then you haul up that chunk of lead and a dead fish. Depressurized too fast.

Doc said we had to get on across the inlet and eat before the mosquitoes moved out of hiding and started feeding. So reluctantly we headed straight for the village. That sure was a funny boat, a twenty-four-foot double-ender with a one lung motor that must have been imported from England by Bronson's father. Chato had to spin a big flywheel with his hands to start it. Then his helper, a little boy named Manuel, stood pouring some

liquid from a can into the motor. It was oil, not gas. The motor had no reverse–and only one speed, about five miles an hour.

At our quarters, a home owned by a widow, Dona Isabel, we relaxed with the aid of a local drink called *cana*, which is also the Spanish word for cane, or sugarcane. The stuff was fiery, but Bink and Chato knew what to do. Chato got some coconuts and with on deft, backhanded stroke with a machete, he cut a neat little opening along with a lid at the pointed end of the coconut.

"Takes skill to cut just far enough so a man can turn the flap back, yet leave a hinge for it," Bink said. "A beginner would whack it off. You need the flap to keep out insects."

Well, he poured some *cana* in the three coconuts and the stuff tasted fine that way. And we put away a huge amount of *bacalao* that Dona Isabela cooked for us, then got inside mosquito nets suspended over air mattresses on the floor and went to sleep to the music of two thousand disappointed mosquitoes.

Bink and Doc are late risers. They're conditioned to that kind of life in Mexico City, where you finish dinner late, get to bed around one o-clock in the morning, maybe get up at nine, and take a siesta in the afternoon. Although I'm a siesta man, I have never been able to cure the habit of waking with the dawn. A hangover from my days of working on an afternoon newspaper.

So at dawn the next morning I went outside, got my tackle, and set off to have a look at the shoreline between our home base and the point where bay and gulf waters

met. That's usually one of the liveliest spots if the tide is right, and I consider a fast incoming tide best. I dropped the lure in the tide rip. No action. After fifteen minutes of fruitless casting, I remembered an experience at the once famed Eighth Pass, on the northeast Gulf Coast of Mexico.

The Eighth was a snook assembly spot for quite a few years, but on one trip we could get action only one way–by casting out into the tide, nudging the lure back gently and letting it sink in the tide rip. I'll tell you later about that Eighth Pass trip, which I arranged when Dan Holland, fishing editor of *Field & Stream* at the time, thought I was stretching it a bit in what I had been writing about the spot. So at Carmen I tried the same trick, casting into the edge of the current, then letting the lure sort of spin as it settled in the tide rip. It never got all the way to the bottom–a lean, lantern-jawed snook took it and pretty soon bombs were bursting in air.

Snook are easier to stick than tarpon because of the almost translucent thin membrane that stretches between the two bony sides of the lower jaw. But a hook is likely to pull out of that membrane. Best bet is to stick it in the jawbone, something you don't always do.

I slid my twenty-pounder onto the sand, far enough so he wouldn't flop back, and at that moment I saw a small tarpon roll. I flipped the plug near the spot, let it sink only a couple of inches, and tapped it. More bombs bursting in air. Maybe I should have felt patriotic. What I actually felt, as I lost the small tarpon then hung a snook, was that any gentleman in my place would hot-foot it back and get Bink and Doc to come join the fun.

I've never claimed to be a gentleman, but I did, after landing my second snook,

head back to home base, dragging the snook along for eating purposes. Finest eating fish are those broiled just after they're killed, and I wanted broiled snook steak for breakfast.

On my way I had almost a hand-to-wing battle with a lot of buzzards blocking my path as they gorged on a big dead fish. You get away from what we usually refer to as the American Way of Life, and you might be surprised to find that people in many parts of the world seldom kill wild creatures just for the hell of it. Nobody bothered those buzzards, so they thought they *owned* the beach. I had to threaten them with my fishing rod to get through.

In about fifteen minutes Bink and Doc and I were glorying in what I call selective fishing–that is, a situation in which you can pretty much take your choice between two equally great gamefish by the way you work the lure. That has happened to me quite a few times, and later I'll tell you about one wild experience in "selective fishing" for redfish and speckled trout.

That morning if we wanted a tarpon, all we had to do was write "tarpon" on the lure, drop it where one showed, let it sink two or three feet and rap it. For snook we had to be careful not to move the lure, lest a tarpon grab it, as the thing wobbled on down close to the bottom.

Doc was using spinning gear, which was relatively new then. It had just come to Mexico City from France, and he had only about eighty yards of line on that reel that looked so offensive (upside down and backass) that I wouldn't touch it for a long time. So he was being careful as possible to get down among the snook, most of which he

could handle, especially since they took off up he bay and parallel to shore, jumping as they moved. Of course Doc marked “snook” on his lure.

Unfortunately, tarpon can’t read signs, and pretty soon Doc got himself all tied up with a flashy five-footer. You don’t stand flat-footed on shore and stop a tarpon that size with eighty yards of light line on your reel–not even if the line is much heavier than what Doc was using. So Doc uttered a few paternosters (or a fisherman’s equivalent thereof) as the tarpon sailed away. Maybe the paternosters were genuine–at least the line broke at the lure, and soon all three of us were back in action, Doc and Bink fighting snook while I roughed up a three-foot tarpon. Even though I have been in many situations where I could pick between two fine gamefish just by the manner of handling my lure, such joys have not come often when tarpon and snook made up the combination.

So I’m going to take a break now from my Carmen story and go back to an earlier one. There is plenty of time to tell more about Carmen and the Laguna de Terminos, and since that area is still one of the best–the least damaged by man, I should tell more. Some of the other spots–they’re barely memories. Those trip I made to the when they were at the peak of glory take on more importance–to me, not others. Let’s switch to a great bay that I saw “created”–and not by man. And that I saw “ruined”–mainly by man.

CHAPTER IX

NEW BAY–CRAZY FISH

All fishermen know what happens when man builds a big new lake. Fishing is wild. And all fishermen soon learn what happens when the man-made lake grows old, at ten to twenty years–fishing goes to hell. But few people have ever explored a huge, brand new bay that was create (I probably should say opened up) by nature, not man. I am among those lucky few.

Along the flat coastline of southern Texas there is a bay more than a hundred miles long, ranging from five to fifteen miles wide. It is called the Laguna Madre–Mother Bay. Almost exactly the same kind of bay, also called Laguna Madre, extends for about a hundred miles south of the Rio Grande on the northeast coast of Mexico. For many years prior to 1933, the Laguna Madre of Mexico was listed as a dead bay, although it really was not dead. There was no inlet from the Gulf of Mexico; at least not enough drain off into the bay to force a cut through the long strip of sand that walled it off from the Gulf. There was, of course, life in the big bay prior to 1933. But not the kind that would interest a fisherman.

Then in 1933 a mighty hurricane literally brought the Gulf inland for many miles, cutting a dozen or more inlets through the strip of sand. And here came the fish–millions of them.

I had just started fiddling around with fishing at that time and paid little attention to occasional reports about the wild fishing in the Laguna Madre of Mexico that was building up after the hurricane. Furthermore, getting down to that bay, which starts about twenty miles south of the Rio Grande, was a tough deal. Bear in mind that we were in the middle of the Big Depression, and none of the people I fished with could afford a puddle jumper to fly down south and land on the beach near one of those passes, as we in Texas call inlets. Getting there by car or truck was really a job–salt flats with no roads, passes that could not be passed. And, according to the reports we began getting, the best fishing was at the Fifth Pass. The First and Third were fair–the Second and Fourth closed soon after they were opened.

The reports we got came mainly from commercial fish operators–enterprising Americans who were moving seining boats to the northern part of the bay and using trucks equipped with huge airplane tires to bring the catch back. Tremendous catches of big speckled trout and redfish and snook. Obviously, those fish moved into the bay, probably from the south. They doggone sure weren't there before the hurricane, and they couldn't have reached such size in a year or two. It is amazing the way saltwater fish will find and swarm into a new feeding area.

Several of us finally made it all the way down to the Fifth Pass because of an adventuresome soul in Brownsville named Vincent Stevenson. He rigged a marsh buggy of sorts, equipping it with pontoons. He used an old Model T Ford truck, and got power to cross the First and Third passes by latching a big propeller onto the stern and rigging it so that the rear wheels of the truck would turn it. Real dopey–and once we barely

escaped being washed out into the breakers in the Gulf. And so we made it to the Fifth Pass.

It was crazy. That's the place where I first enjoyed the luxury of selective fishing. By that time–I think it was 1936, when FDR caught his tarpon–we had switched to lures, and they were ideal in the Fifth, which was so narrow that we could almost cross it. But we soon became annoyed by the redfish, which you may know as channel bass. If you think a man is out of his mind being annoyed by redfish that strike too actively, you are failing to consider the other fish there in the pass–speckled trout. They were huge specks, averaging around five pounds, compared to what we were accustomed to catching in Texas waters–a little more than two pounds average. But redfish kept horning in and taking the lures. Some were husky brutes, twenty pounds or more. Sure, catching a red that size is a lot of fun. Thousands of times I've prayed they would strike. But the specks, even though a bit smaller, were a lot livelier–our kind of fish. So we found that if we worked floaters and kept them moving at a fast clip, we could avoid the redfish and catch only specks–just a red now and then.

We didn't realize it at the time, but one reason for the wild feeding of those fish was an approaching hurricane. Man must have all sorts of gadgets to know when a hurricane is approaching–fish and other creatures just know. Those fish were gorging in anticipation of a long period of lying on the bottom in protected water, doing no feeding, as the hurricane swept over.

It wasn't a big hurricane. But it was big enough to cut a channel through the narrow strip of sand behind us, so there we sat, the truck settled down to its bed in the

sand, water from crashing waves creeping on across the point of land and into our camp. Another slight rise in the tide and we would get the full impact of the mighty waves–and would be swept on out into the big bay.

The hurricane experience soured me on the Laguna Madre of Mexico for a year, but Vince kept dropping around with stories about the Eighth Pass, which he said was ten times more spectacular than the Fifth. So finally a group of us made the trip with him. I paid little attention to it at the time, but on the trip to the Fifth I saw no tarpon. At the Eighth...

We were the first Gringos to camp on the south side of the huge inlet. There we met tarpon...and snook...and specks that topped ten pounds...and reds that topped forty. And when I wrote a story about the trip and sent it to *Field & Stream,* I got a wire from Dan Holland, at that time fishing editor of the magazine. "If there is a fishing hole like that in the world, it is the duty of the fishing editor to try it," he wired.

"Come on down," I wired back.

He came.

Actually, the Seventh Pass, which was in the process of closing, and the Eighth Pass were one, for at high tide water comes over the lump of sand between them. So in the dinky boats we had, it was necessary to swing far out in the bay to get away from rollers that were sweeping in from the Gulf.

It was almost dark when we settled down in camp on the south side of the eighth, and we hit the sack early, for the trip was long and tough. But way along in the night a

noise–one that I had learned to love–awakened me. Fish were feeding at the surface right at the inside edge of the pass, not more than a hundred feet from our tents. I lay trying to figure out what fish were feeding. There was the plop, like a plunker doing its job, of a speck. Then a slash which I figured must be a snook. Then a blast which I knew was a tarpon. You learn to read those sounds just as a trapper learns to read what some animal "writes" on the ground.

I sat up and lit a smoke. Pretty soon somebody else did the same. It was Dave Young.

"You hear what I'm hearing," I asked, as softly as I could, for all eight of us were crowded into one big army tent.

"I hear," Dave said. "And to hear is to obey."

"What's going on," somebody else asked. It was Dan Holland, the city dude from New York.

"Fish are feeding," I said. "Let's go."

I don't like to fish at night. I doubt if I've fished at night more than a dozen times in my life, even though it seems to be extraordinarily effective in taking certain fish–crappie while fishing under a light, for example. Other fish also feed well at night. And for some other fish. Years ago when I was writing regularly for *Esquire*, Arnold Gingrich, the editor, wrote me asking for help in catching seven big bass in a pond near his home. I'm no authority on fishing of any kind, but if you sell fishing stories, you'd better be ready to come up with a suggestion in such situations. I did. I told Gingrich to go out and catch his bass at night. I was astounded when he wrote saying that he had

triumphed. But he didn't convert me–that noise of feeding fish did, at least for the moment. I just couldn't endure that noise. So I flung a floater out in the middle of the feeding fish, figuring that any other lure might get stuck on the bottom If I had a backlash, something you've got to figure on when you fish at night and can't see the flight of your lure.

I got that noble plop of a fine speck and whipped him down–about a seven-pounder, which I released, since all the fish we kept on that trip was enough to eat. And Dan Holland hung a snook, which we could identify when moonlight showed that black stripe along the side. Fine going–Dan landed the snook, a fifteen-pounder. Dave hung a small tarpon but lost it.

Everything still okay. As I recall it, we had just changed to nylon lines then–I think we made the trip in 1938, but I could be a year off. You would be amazed if you should try that first nylon made for fishing. The stuff stretched about an inch to the foot, which meant that when you got a strike thirty yards away, sinking the hook was impossible–about like using a rubber line. Also the nylon would wear quickly from casting, and unless you broke off a few feet after fifteen or twenty minutes of casting, you were likely to see your plug sail on off into eternity with no line to slow it. But–it was better and less expensive than silk, which wore out in a hurry in saltwater. And linen line won't work through a level wind.

So for a time it was cast and bang. Then a fight–or a fish lost on a jump. Then I hung a tarpon. He wasn't a big one, but any tarpon except a baby presented problems on the light tackle I was using–at night. I tried to follow the course of the fish on runs, but it

was hopeless–he'd leap off to one side and I wouldn't even know it was my fish, especially since very little message was relayed to me along that rubbery line. Finally he kicked free.

We made so much noise that soon all eight of those in the party were gathered along the water's edge fishing. Things got out of hand then. One angler would cast over another's line–a fish would run over or under two or three lines. Somebody would have a backlash and start shouting when a fish struck the lure and finally busted the line. Pretty crazy fish–real crazy fishermen.

I finally got a kingsize backlash, and I didn't even bother to work on it. I just hauled the line in by hand and put my gear aside. Spectacular or not spectacular, this wasn't my kind of fishing. I wanted to *see* what was happening. So I stood and listened, to fish feeding on shrimp (big school moving in), to fish striking, to fishermen shouting. Soon I noticed that Dave and Hurt, the old regulars, had also quit fishing and were standing watching. The others fished on–until the shrimp worked their way through the pass and on up the bay, and all action came to a halt.

"It's even crazier that you said it was," Dan remarked, as we went back to the tent, passed the tequila jug around for a nerve settler, then crawled back onto our cots.

We came to a dividing of paths at dawn that morning. The great schools of specks had moved into the bay, following the shrimp. In such situations shrimp hightail it (backward if being pursued) out to the what we call the grass flats–shallow water, grassy bottom. Hurt is a dedicated speckled trout fisherman, and if he can raise them on a

"floating spoon" out in the flats, he'll abandon tarpon to others. So he and three more of the group headed up the bay in pursuit of specks.

Dave and I are far more dedicated to tarpon, so we decided to try the pass. Dan Holland fished with us. For a half hour nothing of note happened except that a group of "outside agitators" came swarming in on us. To an arch conservative, anybody from out of time who has slightly different views is branded an outside agitator. To a fisherman glorying in complete isolation, *anybody* showing up on the scene is an outside agitator. And here came six or seven people, town dudes, judging by their tackle and the way they cast. Backlashes–and more backlashes. That's what they were getting, trying to cast with rods too short and stubby and with reels too big and line too heavy.

Dan and Dave and I were disgusted, since we felt crowded at our "own" casting spot. Crowded can mean strangely different things. A rat isn't crowded by ten people to the apartment–an eagle is crowded if he can see a human being. So we started to take off and follow Hurt and his companions. But at that moment one of the dudes started shouting. He had picked out a backlash, and when he started cranking in, a snook took his lure. Then another dude got excited–and then Dan and Dave and I elbowed our way back into the thick of things.

Bear in mind that the year was 1938, long before Dave and I learned about those bottom-feeding tarpon in the Rio Grande and long before Bink and Doc and I figured out how to take snook at Carmen by going down. We started casting out into the edge of the current and letting the lures go down–all the way to the bottom if nothing hit. We just nudged the lure a bit at intervals as it went down. And all of a sudden we were battling

snook. These were big snook, ranging from twelve pounds to more than our little scales would handle–twenty-five pounds. We estimated some at thirty-five.

I think Hurt saw the flashes of light–and even though he was several hundred yards away, he could tell they were battling snook, not tarpon. So he began working his way back toward us, taking a speck now and then, but not raising them as he had hoped to. Unfortunately for him, a big school of tarpon moved in just before he reached us, so the first thing he did was hang a five-footer on light casting gear, and away went a lure and a small chunk of line.

But he solved the tarpon problem. He did just what Bink and Doc and I did at Carmen ten years later–he let the lure weave on down through the tarpon, if that was agreeable to them, then rap it when it got down deep. Soon he had what he wanted, a fifteen pound snook slashing at the surface. The snook seldom comes straight up, after the manner of tarpon. Most of the time the snook lunges along more of a horizontal line, the way he does in feeding at the surface.

Well, Dan and Dave and I and a couple of others preferred tarpon, and we had casting tackle a bit heavier than Hurt was using, so we could hope to handle anything up to five feet. At one time that morning five of us had tarpon on at the same time. When I lost mine, I reluctantly put my rod down and got out the camera. I wanted to get a shot of three or four tarpon leaping at the same time. Of course I never did, although several of the shots showed five fishermen battling game. I wanted PROOF for Dan to take back with him, and he got plenty of it.

And we had our fishing spot to our selves. The dudes, who were really pretty nice guys, even if they did invade my territory, all headed for the nearby surf. Vince told them they could catch twenty- and thirty-pound redfish there, and that's what they wanted, and that's what they got.

We were completely exhausted when the fish finally moved on–even too tired to eat until we had a couple of solid tequilas to lift the spirits.

Fishing was the same day after day. By the time we left the Eighth, our hands were covered with cuts from handling snook and tarpon and other fish. And the saltwater sort of corroded the cuts. It did worse on our legs. I left there with saltwater sores, as they are called, that a doctor couldn't cure for two months–I've still got scars on my legs from that trip.

That trip had a real funny windup.

The last morning, when we were to cross the pass–actually two passes–early and head for home, fish started that popping, slashing, lunging business in the pass near our tent. I raised up on an elbow, fired a smoke, and listened for a moment.

"So you hear it, too," Dave whispered.

"Yes, but I'm not going to do a damn thing about it."

I went back to sleep to the sound of feeding fish. We estimated that we had caught more than three thousand speckled trout, along with several hundred redfish and at least three hundred snook. The trout were monster. We *never* caught a small one–the kind that Texans catch now, ranging from a foot to maybe a foot and a half. We caught

fish from four pounds up to eleven, by actual weight. The snook averaged fifteen pounds. And first prize in the speckled trout division of the 1971 Port Isabel Fishing Roundup (Originally the Port Isabel Tarpon Rodeo) went to a fish that weighed two and a half pounds. At the Eighth in 1938 you could have used him as bait.

Even though we planned an early takeoff and promised each other there would be no fishing, somebody threw a plug out in the pass and hooked another snook. And, of course, soon we were all busy catching snook and we kept putting off and putting off the time of departure. We kept none of the fish–only those we had already eaten. The truck on the north side of the Eighth would get us back to an eating place by noon–we thought.

Well, when we finally stumbled–from sheer weariness–up to the truck, we found that it wouldn't run. Vince was waiting for a part that had to be brought from his base camp, on the north side of the First Pass (where we had expected to eat). There was no food on our truck. We had stayed two days longer than expected, and everything was gone. We had returned probably fifteen thousand pounds of edible fish to the water–now we didn't have even one to eat.

"Somebody has to go catch a few fish," Vince said.

But who? We were weary, nursing our saltwater sores, sunburned, and the idea of catching a fish to eat the thing appealed to none of us. So we drew straws to see who would *have* to go out a little way in the bay in a boat and catch a few specks.

Dan and I lost.

When I cut the motor and we got ready to cast, he said "Do me a favor and never say a word about this."

“About what,” I asked.

“About drawing straws to see who would *have* to go catch a fish. Dad would have a really good laugh on me.”

Dan’s father, Ray Holland, was editor of *Field & Stream* at that time. Later Dan entered the Navy in World War II and suffered a back injury from some kind of explosion on ship. But he recovered and returned to writing in the outdoor field. And when he and his father and a younger bother whose name I don’t recall brought out a book, mainly reproduction of photos, some of the shots I made of Dan at the Eighth were included.

That was the Eighth *before* man worked it over with nets and seines. I’ll tell you more about it later–how it is today. Real sad.

CHAPTER X

THE LAMPS OF MEXICO

Oddball little gadgets sometimes serve to link two momentous events separated by quite a time span–in this case more than fifteen years.

At Carmen the gadget was a lampwick.

Dr. Roy B. Dean, one of my companions on that first journey to Carmen, back in 1947, was at that time a practicing orthodontist in Mexico City. He retired ten years later.

Doc could do things with metal–part of his professional skill.

So after his first trip to Carmen, one that he and Bink made only a short time before the three of us went there, Doc noted some things that did not please him.

The best all-round lure seemed to be a feather jig–or simply a feather, as fishermen call it. I think the first feather lures were made in Japan. At least we referred to them as "those Japanese lures."

Barracuda quickly chewed the feathers off Doc's lures. Neither tarpon nor snook have teeth, although tarpon will eventually wear out a feather. Barracuda do the job in a hurry.

So when we took off, Doc was all stocked up with a new kind of "feather." He made some lures fastening lampwicks to a small chunk of lead in which a hook was embedded.

There were plenty of kerosene lamps in Mexico then, hence plenty of lampwicks. I guess there are still plenty of lampwicks in Mexico. I'm not sure you can buy one in this country except in some novelty store.

Doc did a neat job turning out those lampwick lures, although they sure looked gooney to me, and I wondered about the drab, off-white color. Quite a contrast to the bright colors on the Japanese lures.

But, even though fish are not color blind, most of the gaudy color on lures is put there to attract fishermen, not fish. We clearly proved this in the early days of our speckled trout fishing by simply fastening hooks and a screw-eye to an old-style wood clothes pin and catching bushels of fish. No color.

But at times color–probably intensity rather than the color itself–*can* make a difference. I won’t go into that now, for I’m busy with Doc’s lampwick lures.

Later experience, at Carmen and elsewhere, leads me to believe that Doc had more action on that trip than we did because of the extra weight of his lampwicks, not necessarily shape or color or action. His lures were so heavy I had to cast with a big sweeping motion, so I didn’t use them at first.

But the snook kept saying, “We want lampwicks,” and Doc gave the, what they wanted. And finally Bink and I yielded and borrowed lures from Doc.

They would settle quickly to the spot, near the bottom, where snook were gathered–so we gathered snook.

Then we decided that we should try to explore some of the big bay. Doc and Bink insisted I had an obligation to do so, since I was going to tell the great American fishing public about this brand new hotspot.

Well, our exploring sure fizzled in a hurry, partly because of that oddball boat, partly because of the size of the bay–thirty mile by fifteen miles.

Two fairly large, but not very long, rivers, the Candelaria and the Grijalva, empty into the bay, and there are many smaller streams coming out of the jungle. You get a wide variety of game at the mouth of any of these streams.

It would take an angler three months of steady travel and fishing to really explore the Laguna de Terminos and streams emptying into it. Our time was limited to five days–our speed to five miles an hour.

We finally got to the mouth of one small stream–I don't recall its name–and had a lively time with small tarpon for about an hour, after which the tarpon moved and we began hanging pargo.

As I have mentioned, the pargo–a snapper–found there is shaped pretty much like a redfish and fights about the same way, being quite different from the red snapper caught over submerged reefs in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Carmen pargo is a better gamefish, and we got a kick out of making them strike our "floating spoons," three-eighths-ounce spoons that we could keep on top by holding the rod tip high and receiving fast.

But with that kind of light gear you give up on pargo pretty soon if they are around mangroves, for they dig in–and when the line touches a barnacle it's gone.

And there are always barnacles on mangroves–*mangles*, the Mexicans call them. Also oysters on some of them.

It was the same old story–the fish I love, the jumpers, head for open water and fight like a man, the non-jumpers burrow into obstacles.

We never tried the surf, although Bronson, the Englishman, said it was working with big gamefish. I believed him. I'm just not a surf fisherman–don't like being banged around by waves.

On the last day we decided that I also owed my gentle reading public in the U.S. some information about really big tarpon, and we figured a scheme to help us catch one.

Since Chato's ship would cruise at only one speed–five miles an hour–we solved the problem of achieving proper trolling speed by rigging a sail on the boat and trolling smack into the breeze.

We would troll through the channel then make a fast run back and troll again. We used those huge Pflueger Record spoons–the idea was to hang a big one solidly and land him.

And Doc got fast to a giant, well over six feet and weighing, we estimated, at least 180 pounds. He battled it with his sailfish gear, standard light tackle for billfish, at least at that time. And Doc knew how to handle that gear–at various times over a period of years he held records in fishing for sails with light tackle.

After we brought that one to gaff Bink and I trolled on until each of us landed a tarpon around the six-foot mark.

And that night we ate baked iguana and drank *cana* from coconuts and specualted on whether the three of us would ever again sit out in the open at that spot and look at the Southern Cross.

We never did. But–the objective at that time was achieved.

Then came that funny lampwick lure coincidence more than fifteen years later. Hal Hassey, a man who owned and operated a printing plant in New York, somehow got a copy of my book, *Fishing in Mexico,* and read about that trip to Carmen.

He suddenly decided he had been spending his life the wrong way, so he sold out and went to Carmen and opened a first-rate fishing lodge. He was going to make a pot of money on Gringo anglers, and he wrote me asking if I would be his guest on a trip to his lodge–and, of course, write a magazine story.

I said sure if I could get an assignment–and if he would just give me and my companions whatever reduction he wished on the tab. I don't make long fishing trips alone–and, as I have mentioned, deadheading doesn't always work out right.

So I wrote Zack Taylor, at that time associate editor of *Sports Afield.* And here's another coincidence–I got from Zack almost the same message I got from Dan Holland way back in 1938–if there is such a fishing hole, the associate editor ought to visit it.

I told him to come on–I was sure of my fishing spot, just as I was of the once-famed Eighth.

Want to guess what greeted us when we pulled up to shore in front of Hal Hassey's fishing lodge?

Lampwick lures. And being used by Mexican commercial fishermen.

They were standing on the beach, at almost the same spot where Bink and Doc and I stood back in 1947, and they were hurling out big lampwick lures on handlines.

And they were catching snook. And as we docked one of the fishermen hung a five-foot tarpon, so we had the pleasure of seeing a genuine battle. That fisherman, using no gloves to protect his leather tough hands, whipped the tarpon down and hauled it in. And kept it. Tarpon are eaten by people along the east coast of Mexico.

But the lampwicks charmed me. Exactly the same as those Doc had "invented," although the lead was heavier.

It wasn't the first time I've seen that sort of thing in Mexico. On one of my first trips to Tampico my companions and I made a short run south in the Tamiahua Lagoon to fish for speckled trout and snook. We had fine action, and the Mexican guides made careful note of the lures we were using–small, fast sinking plugs that had a faint resemblance to shrimp, at least in the area of action.

Quite a few years later some friends and I went back to that lagoon–and ran into a "school of fishermen," all using plugs made in the exact imitation of the ones we used. Theirs were carved from the horns of cattle.

One wrinkled old man, fishing alone, really had a system going. He was paddling his little dugout type (it was made of planking) craft and had the heavy line tied to the big toe of his left foot.

The toe was about twice the size of his other big toe. I guess there is a streak of meanness in every human being–at least I sat there watching him, hoping that a stud jackfish would grab the lure and really give that toe a battle.

Maybe plenty of jackfish had already done that, judging by the size of the toe.

The old man was catching fish–and on *our* lures.

And the commercial fishermen at Carmen were catching snook–on Doc's lampwick lures. And at *our* fishing spots.

Out of the past shall come lampwicks–like oil for the lamps of China.

To Zack that was a miracle fishing hole. We found that we could catch snook way out in the wide pass–by going deep for them. And Hal Hassey, the Yankee book binder, made me look a bit sad one morning because he had the kind of feather that would go down much faster than mine. His was so heavy I couldn't cast it, so I had none along. I finally borrowed one and sort of flung it out slanchwise. And caught snook.

And we caught tarpon and Zack was a true believer. And we caught big barracuda and big pargo.

I didn't say anything about it to Zack, but I noticed a great difference in the fishing on that trip–I believe it was in 1962–and the fishing back in 1947.

The reason I said nothing: That old deadhead handicap. We were getting our trip at cost. It's a bad idea–and that was my last.

But I could easily see the change–caused almost entirely by my fellow Americans, who were in the process of catching practically all those great white shrimp out of that wonderful bay.

It started soon after my first 1947 trip–maybe because of what I wrote about the bay. Soon American fish houses, headquartered at Brownsville, Texas, were flying those monster, premium white shrimp out of Carmen by the thousand of tons.

Shrimp attract gamefish. Take away the shrimp...

I spent much of my time on that trip noting the difference in the fishing in that fifteen year span. About a tenth as many tarpon. About a tenth as many snook, judging by the time and effort necessary to get action.

Sure, Zack thought it was wonderful. And I agree that any man who demands better fishing than we had in 1962 is a hog. You can't compare *any* well-fished bay with a virgin bay and fail to note the difference.

Part of that difference is, of course, caused by anglers. A hundred anglers fishing in one area might catch twenty tarpon. Four anglers might catch almost the same.

And we had company on that trip–several other parties of Gringos trolling and casting.

But the big difference was the vanishing shrimp.

You kill a bay by polluting the water or taking out the shrimp or taking the gamefish out with seines.

Anglers can't do the job–although they can *change* the nature of the fishing through a process of education. Yes, you can educate tarpon–and snook.

Evidently there has been still more change in Carmen since my last trip. For HAssey left it and moved on, around the huge lump of land called the Yucatan Peninsula,

setting up in a “brand new” fishing spot along the coast where Mexico and Guatemala meet.

But...that spot will eventually be crowded.

I tried to locate Chato on that trip but had no luck. He had either died or moved, and getting details was difficult since Chato is a popular nickname in Mexico.

What I wanted to do, especially after watching those commercial fishermen handlining for snook with the Dr. Roy B. Dean Special, was give Chato some of my plugs that were sure-fire poison on pargo. I tried them and verified it. The plugs got ten times more pargo action than feathers.

I finally gave the plugs to Jacinto, skipper of our fishing boat, and he was delighted. I didn’t have to tell him how to work them, for he had watched the Gringos fish–including us.

But one thing I forgot to tell him–don’t put one of those plugs anywhere near a tarpon. It would strip the hooks off a plug fastened to a heavy handline.

So as we were boarding our taxi for the trip back to Carmen, I took a long last look at the inlet–and saw Jacinto do a lovely job of flinging one of those plugs way out.

Then I saw a six-foot tarpon latch on. The line went sizzling through Jacinto’s work-hardened hands until the tarpon reached the end, then the silver king sailed on, carrying with him a few hooks jerked from the plug.

That was, as I said, my last journey to “Iguana Hotspot,” as some of my friends called it.

And I sometimes mull over possible changing during the ten-year interval since that trip. I wonder about the iguana, now that he is on the popularity list of "pets" in this country.

I meditate on these "cultural accidents," as Herskowitz might have termed them, and form a mental picture that might even intrigue Charles Addams. I see a tarpon, a six-foot silver king, in a fish bowl in some suburban home.

Maybe he will survive there.

But I don't want to get deeply involved right now in that business of survival, even though I *do* think it is possible the tarpon may be placed on the list of endangered species.

I want to get back to fishing.

CHAPTER XI

THE LITTLE CHILDREN AT PLAY

Then there was the day when we met the babies–tarpon ranging from eight to fourteen inches.

The introduction took place at a small arroyo extending inland from the Laguna de Tamiahua, a bay that starts at Tampico and extends south about sixty miles along the coast.

It would be nice to say that we learned something that day about where baby tarpon come from. We really didn't. And nobody else seems to be certain–the icthyologists and marine biologists are in agreement on one point about where baby tarpon come from. The storks have nothing to do with it.

From there on everything is confusion, as I will explain later in relating my frustrations in attempts to find out about the life cycle of tarpon.

I had never seen tarpon that size before, even though I had been fishing for the silver king for twenty years when my companions and I spotted them in the little arroyo.

But there they were in that little ditch. Of course I had read about anglers catching baby tarpon on fly rods in the Florida Everglades and in some little rivers of Cuba. But I kept hands off that area, and for a very good reason.

Several writers for the outdoor magazines had stories now and then about tarpon fishing in Florida and the West Indies, and they sometimes mentioned the babies, the fly rod size. Those writers never invaded “my” territory–Texas and Mexico. So I was careful not to horn in on their territory–Florida and the West Indies.

As my companions and I stood on the bank of the arroyo watching the show, I had a definite feeling that we were watching children play grown-up, trying to imitate mama and papa. There was something funny about a ten-inch tarpon surfacing–or maybe blasting some tiny fish or crustacean. It didn’t seem exactly real to me.

But I wasted little time on that line of reflection. I hurried to my tackle box and dug out the tiniest lures I had–quarter-ounce spoons. Then quickly rigged my lightest tackle–featherweight rod, undersize 4-ounce reel and ten-pound test line.

My companions were doing the same–getting ready to “do battle” with the children.

And as we skipped the tiny lures along the surface it was bang! bang! bang! Those were *mean* children. Killers.

As so often happens when you pursue a gamefish throughout a big chunk of its range, our meeting with those babies was purely accidental. The original objective of our trip to Tampico was to do more “research” in that big Tamiahua Lagoon. Then we were going to return to Tampico and work over the tarpon in our favorite river, the Panuco, before returning to the States.

I had fished the northern part of the bay before, accompanied by two longtime fishing companions from Houston, Felix Stagno and Bill Saylor. We caught some mighty speckled trout and a few snook but saw no tarpon.

On that trip the native Indian commercial handline fishermen, who supplied the Tampico market, were astounded when they watched us catch fish on artificial lures, something they had never seen before.

But, as I have mentioned, they surprised us on a later trip by flashing their own hand-crafted lures made in imitation of ours.

Our original plan to cruise south only ten miles or so, taking along three skiffs from which to fish once we found game, was greatly altered when an unseasonable norther blustered in.

Our mother boat, one of those river launches, couldn't push against the wind. So we cruised with it and went zipping along at a nice speed until we got all the way to the village of Tamiahua, at the southern tip of the bay.

Russ Lee of Austin was with us, along with Stagno ad Saylor and a couple of other anglers I hadn't met before. We didn't mind being practically blown all the way down into new fishing waters, especially since a tiny stream emptied into the Gulf near the village, and we figured we would murder the snook and tarpon there.

We didn't. In fact, we didn't do much good at all–caught enough specks to feed us, which wasn't much to brag about since the trout ranged from six pounds and four would feed the whole gang, including the skipper and his mate.

Something was screwball. A beautiful, unfished bay, plenty of grass flats on each side of the channel in the middle of the bay, and a little river connecting the bay and gulf. It should be a fishing paradise.

Felix finally figured it out. Then...ah, hang around and listen.

"The tide's going out, isn't it," Felix asked, as we sat on the deck of our mother ship eating breakfast at dawn.

"Sure," I said. "Which means no fishing at the mouth of the river."

"Remember those shrimp traps two or three miles up the bay that we passed on our way down," Felix asked.

We did.

"Okay. Let's go work 'em over," Felix said.

Those shrimp traps were additional testimony to the inequity of the Mexican fishermen who had not made the complete switch to Gringo ways–huge drag seines that clean out a bay in short order.

The traps were made in the shape of a "V" with a small opening at the bottom. They were made by pushing green mangrove stems into the muddy bottom. The sticks were so close together that not even shrimp could get through them.

The wide part of the "V"-shaped trap started out on the shallow, grassy flat, and the narrow part was tight at the edge of the flat, close to the channel, but still in water no more than four feet deep.

Shrimp moved out over the grass flat at high tide to feed. Then they moved back with the outgoing tide. Some moved into and through the traps. In the daytime it was safe–the Indians did not shrimp in the daytime because the crustaceans could see the tiny net and backtrack, which a shrimp can do in a hell of a hurry.

The Indians fished only at night, hanging a kerosene lantern on a peg at the bottom of the trap, and sitting hour after hour, while the tide was moving out, dipping up the shrimp that came through.

So we weren't horning in on their fishing, since we went forth in daytime, although they did follow us and watch curiously, some suspiciously, as we began casting lures around their traps.

Felix had figured that if shrimp came through that narrow bottom of the trap when the tide moved out, fish would have enough sense to assemble at the traps and do some feeding.

He was right. On my first cast i hung into an wight pound trout and whipped him down. While I was working him over, Russ, in the boat with me, hung a fifteen-pound snook. And I noticed that others in the group were having similar action at other traps.

There it was, dream fishing. Long, lean. silvery snook, ranging from eight to fifteen pounds, specks ranging from three to eight.

And they were blasting floaters. Since the speckled trout seldom jumps (a hook in the gill will cause him to), I like to get a full measure of enjoyment by making these fish strike at the surface. I might be wrong, but I believe a speck that takes a surface lure will boil at the surface more in fighting the hook. That's what a big speck does–moves up to

the surface and jerks his head from side to side. You usually see only a little of his head. But the sound is fine and there is always an element of uncertainty at that moment.

Of course there's always an element of uncertainty when you are fighting a big (four pounds up) speck, because he has a surprisingly fragile bony structure around his mouth. That's how he got the name weakfish. At any moment the hook might pull through the bone.

It was mild fishing, and we weren't bugged by any small ones. The big ones would have eaten them.

"Who could ask for more," Russ said.

"I could," I told him.

"What?"

"Tarpon."

"Well, get set, for here they come."

I looked around and saw a three-footer roll–then one a bit larger. When I looked back I had a tarpon in the line. Schools of them, rather small schools, seemed to have some sort of arrangement as to territorial rights. For they showed up at practically all the traps.

They scared the specks away but not the snook.

So we had that delightful combination once more–tarpon and snook. And they were banging away at surface lures.

There was limited commercial fishing at that spot then, mainly because of difficulty getting the fish out. No roads. When it rained–and it rained on us–the dirt roads were impassable.

Most of the shrimp caught at those traps was dried. Dried shrimp is fine for those who can stand the stink. I can't seem to negotiate it.

So the shrimp take was small–not enough to cut deeply into the food supply for game fish, something that happened at the beautiful Laguna de Terminos, father south.

And there was little commercial fishing. Some fish were dried and sold to nearby ranchers. The nearest large market was Tampico, and it was supplied by fish taken near the city.

So our fishing hole was almost virgin–if there can be such a state. And we were sad at the thought of leaving. But time was running out, and when we realized that Old Limp Limp, as we had come to call our mother boat, wasn't going to make it back in the face of the wind, still blowing from the north, we mooched a ride in a truck to a village a dozen miles inland, and there we hired two taxis to take us back to Tampico.

And suddenly we came to a halt when we stopped at the little arroyo, where the taxis were ferried across.

The little fellows were ten times livelier than their elders, which I guess you would expect. The instant one felt a hook it bounced in the air and seemed to stay there, like a marlin "suspended" on a long aerial burst.

But we weren't landing any of them–and I wanted to see one on the bank, to examine it and see if it was real. They would hit floaters, but the lures merely bounced.

Finally i dug deep in my tackle box and came up with something I figured might work. It was a lure I had forgotten, a dinky metal thing with some red beads and tiny spinners on it, and treble hooks at the stern so small a minnow could have taken them.

It was a lure given to me by a friend in Mexico City when we made a trip way up in the mountains west of there and battled rainbow trout in a little man-made lake. The lure had been made in France, and it was intended for use with spinning gear, which was relatively new then.

I could barely cast it. I'm sure it didn't weigh a quarter ounce. But by making a wide swing instead of a quick snap, I could get it out far enough to reach the tarpon.

And I stuck one.

He really put on a dance act as I gently worked him toward the bank, which was eight feet down below me. A little Mexican boy standing in the mud down there grabbed the leader and flipped the twenty-inch baby tarpon up on the shore beside me.

Mainly I wanted to feel inside his mouth–to see if the bony structure there was as tough as it is in adult tarpon. It was. I took a couple of photos and put him back in the water.

I passed the little lure around and we were having a fine time until somebody said, "We're going to get to Tampico after dark if we don't get moving."

That instantly stopped the fishing. Those blind corners, the dim lights, the wild horn music...

I sure didn't want to get caught in that business of competing for the right-of-way at each street intersection. So we hurried on to Tampico and ate rock crabs and broiled pompano, and the next day we headed for the Rio Grande.

"We ought to go back there," I remarked to Felix as we were driving home.

"And take my cartop boat," he said.

"And get right down on level with them," he added. "And go on up the arroyo, then down it until it hits the bay."

You plan those trips. You make some. But the range of the tarpon is vast, and you can't make them all.

I never went back to Tampico again.

I did, however, resolve that I would find out something about the life cycle of the tarpon. I was merely curious then–and I was still curious after I got the meagre available material of a scientific nature on the life cycle of the tarpon.

It was vague–and conflicting. So I dropped it.

When I started writing this book, fifteen years after that trip, I felt obliged to go ahead and finish my "research" and really find out about the life cycle of the tarpon. And I quote the word "research," because I never do it personally. I'm allergic to libraries and other gloomy places where you talk in whispers and can't smoke and drink.

As I say, fifteen years ago I was merely curious.

Now I really wanted to know because of the critical situation in the world of the tarpon, at least along the Texas coast. And before anybody can do anything to help a species survive, somebody *must* learn about the life cycle of that species.

Know what?

There is no more information available today than there was fifteen years ago. And I was astounded to note the wide variation of "facts" about the tarpon's life cycle in all the bulletins and reports, etc., that I accumulated.

One thing is certain: a female tarpon of good size, 130 pounds or so, will spawn about 12 million eggs. That's a lot of eggs.

Another certainty: The eggs hatch into a larval form, a tiny, translucent "flatworm," with two black dots (eyes) at one end. The the larvae grown "down" instead of up. They absorb whatever stuff is in the larva as they change to a true fish form, like a chicken embryo.

Some of my "authorities" say that tarpon spawn from 100 to 200 kilometers out in the open Gulf–or Atlantic–and that the larvae start working their way back toward shore, becoming true fish in the process.

Nuts. I've never seen a tarpon more than twelve miles offshore except around coral islands off Vera Cruz, and those islands are part of a chain, with relatively shallow water between them. Tarpon are not a deep water fish, on the order of sails and dolphin. They are surf and bay and river feeders.

But I *have* seen plenty of those funny translucent things, for Spanish mackerel belch them up now and then when you haul a fish into your boat. I always thought they were the larvae of eels. Maybe they are tarpon in-the-becoming.

Another "authority" says tarpon spawn up rivers.

Another "authority" says they spawn in shallow, muddy bay waters.

Still another says they spawn near inlets where currents will carry the eggs out to sea, way out, then when the eggs hatch, the larval tarpon start working back homeward, angel.

Take your pick of the theories.

All I *do* know, and I know it definitely, is that the tarpon is an estuarine fish, and that part of the life cycle–probably that of the tiny fish soon after it changes from larval form–is spent in brackish or fresh water.

And that tiny fish depends on plankton to survive.

Pollute the water, or kill the plankton by running the water through an industrial plant, or stop the flow of water entirely (as in the Rio Grande), and what happens?

A link in the life cycle is busted to hell.

Now let's go on to another fishing trip.

CHAPTER XII

LANDLOCKED TARPON

The biggest surprise of my tarpon fishing career came one day when I was serenely casting for black bass in the still, clear water of a *resaca* near my home in Brownsville.

The word *resaca* is applied to old bends in the Rio Grande but no longer a part of it. The river did a lot of channel cutting and changing in its lower delta before it was harnessed by man.

There is no connection between that *resaca* and the Rio Grande–no way in, no way out. Completely landlocked.

I was fishing alone, something I seldom do. And I got to daydreaming, something I often do, and just sat in the little skiff for a few minutes while my floating lure moved gently up and down with the ripples on the surface.

Finally I solved whatever earth-shaking problem was occupying my mind at the time, and I gave the floater, a plunking type lure, a gentle nudge.

A thirty-inch tarpon latched on and boiled up in the air.

I was so surprised I didn't even try to hit him. I sat staring in utter disbelief as the tarpon rattled his gills. Raising a whale wouldn't have surprised me more. I knew what

fish were in that *resaca*–bass, what we call Rio Grande perch (a cichlid), a dopey fish we call a Mexican sleeper, gars, bream, turtles, mullet and some odds and ends.

No tarpon. No whales.

Yet there he was, in the act of pitching my lure back at me. I got busy and beat the waters in that entire area, keeping a sharp lookout for any tarpon rolling. Then I made a run up the *resaca* and down it, going fairly fast and just looking. No signs of another.

When i went to Hurt Batsell's store, fishermen's headquarters, the next day and told my story, nobody believed me. Hurt was thinking, "the guy's had too much tequila. I told him the stuff was mind-softening."

But Hurt did agree to go with me to the *resaca* the next day and see if we could find my lost tarpon again.

Want to guess what we caught? Two snook.

This was too much. Somebody was moving the bay into *my resaca*. (so few other people fished it that I had squatter's rights). Sure, snook go hundreds of miles up rivers, and according to some "authorities" a lot of them never bother to go back and face the rougher life in saltwater.

Again I quote the "authorities" because there are none.

The life cycle of the snook is better known than that of the tarpon, but there are still gaps, as, for example, whether the snook can reproduce successfully in landlocked freshwater.

The little research done so far has been carried on at the southern tip of Florida–none in southern Mexico and Guatemala and so on, where there are several varieties of

snook. Also no research on the Pacific coast of Mexico, where there is a lean, lovely snook that is an exact counterpart of what we call the tide-runner on the east coast of Mexico.

Quite obviously at some time in the past snook were able to make their way between the two oceans, since these species are so much alike. But if members of the weakfish tribe ever communicated between two oceans, it sure was a long time ago, since the *corbina* (sometimes spelled *corvina*) and *totuava* of Mexico's west coast are quite different from our old pal the speckled trout of the east coast.

Those of the west coast have no spots. And they're larger, which seems true of many kinds of fish–sails, dolphin, etc.

As for tarpon–there are none except a few that were lugged across Panama from the Atlantic and planted in the Pacific the past century. Unlike the striped bass, the tarpon has not done much in Pacific waters.

The snook we caught that day were small, about three pounds. And we didn't see a sign of a tarpon. We did, however, figure out how the snook and tarpon got there. During the great hurricane of 1933, which opened all those passes into the Laguna Madre of Mexico, water from the Gulf came inland halfway to Brownsville, and the situation was aggravated by a deluge of twelve inches of rain in twenty-four hours.

So those great rollers sweeping inland must have brought tiny snook and tarpon–and the fish somehow managed to get themselves trapped in my *resaca* when it flooded and met incoming Gulf water.

It was baffling to me then and it is now, mainly because neither I nor any of my fishing companions have ever seen a baby tarpon or snook in the shore waters or rivers of Texas. We took it for granted that these fish did not spawn along the Texas coast. And I still think they do not. Then how come these babies got into my *resaca*?

Probably because the great swells moved in a northeasterly direction, bringing those baby fish from Mexico.

I'm not sure. But is any marine biologist ready to come up with a better explanation?

Hurt and Dave and I and several others started a sort of campaign. Catching the two snook convinced Hurt. He didn't doubt my lonesome tarpon story after that. But we weren't having any luck locating that tarpon or any others. And we couldn't catch anymore snook, although now and then some other angler–some "foreigner" horning in on my *resaca*–would come in with a story about catching a snook or two.

Finally we hit pay dirt.

Hurt and I decided to go all the way to the northeast end of the *resaca*, an area I seldom fished because it wasn't much good for bass. Not enough plant growth in the waters.

And we ran smack into a school of about twenty tarpon.

We raised four, using bass plunkers, and I landed one. It was thirty-two inches long, sleek, in real fine condition, with no visible signs of damaging fungus or parasites.

The school of tarpon vanished after I landed that one–on bass tackle and after a pretty doggone tough hassle–and we couldn't find them again.

Hurt wanted to take the tarpon in and hang it in the entrance to his tackle store. I was reluctant fro two reasons: I wanted to leave it there in my *resaca* so I could catch it again, and I dreaded the thought of an army of strangers storming out to my personal fishing hole in quest of tarpon.

But I yielded, so Hurt strung up the fish and put a sign on it saying that I caught it in the Olmito *resaca*, real name of the *resaca*.

Fishermen are funny creatures. Nobody showed any interest. In the first place, they thought it was a trick. In the second place, they just weren't interested. Tarpon no good to eat.

We continued fishing the upper part of the *resaca*–and all other parts of it–but we never raised another tarpon. Never saw one. I caught a couple of snook over a period of six months and noted that they were growing nicely and seemed healthy.

Then for almost two years nothing more happened, and we decided the snook and tarpon had died. We were right about the tarpon, wrong about the snook.

One day, during a severe freeze that came near wrecking the citrus fruit industry of the lower Rio Grande Valley, I got a call from a friend who lived on the *resaca*–at a big bend where there was a deep hole.

"Come on over in a hurry," he said. "Snook are dying."

What he really said was, "Pike are dying." That's what we called the fish when we first encountered it. Later we grudgingly accepted snook as the proper name.

That was a sad, sad spectacle. By that time the snook had become man-size. They ranged around ten to fifteen pounds. I've caught much bigger snook, but nobody puts down a ten-pounder.

A snook would slowly float to the surface, belly up. Killed by the cold.

"I've counted twenty-one," my friend said, as we stood on the bank shivering in the icy wind, something people in that semi-tropical country are not accustomed to.

What really distressed me was the men in boats out over that deep hole, scoping up snook as they moved up to the surface dead. They were shouting gleefully. Of course that was the sensible thing to do, since the snook is fine eating–much better than black bass.

But at the moment, as I watched those dying snook surface slowly, the men dipping them up seemed like scavengers.

The final "catch" was fifty-four. And as I drove away, I kept thinking, "Where the hell have those snook been for the last year or two? How come I haven't raised one in a year?"

I got the answer later, in trying to catch the snook that snuggle up close to the banks of the Panuco River at Tampico.

The snook in my *resaca* had learned about lures. You confine fish and show the lures for a time and you educate them. Maybe I could have fooled them by offering a live mullet–-and the *resaca* was loaded with mullet. But I don't fish with live–or once live–bait.

You might assume that we could have developed different technique with a variety of lures and caught some of those snook, just as we always managed to catch tarpon one way or another if we were among them.

But the situations are not parallel. Tarpon gather in certain spots–inlets, deep holes in bays, deep holes in rivers, the mouth of rivers, etc.–and you can *see* them. Finally you work out a trick of some kind to get action, even if the tarpon have been fished hard for quite a spell.

But snook? You don't know where they are. And who wants to work miles and miles of shoreline trying to trick something that isn't there?

What we consider doing was arranging to have several thousand small snook and tarpon dumped in the *resaca*. We talked to a lot of people about the idea, but the reaction was pretty negative.

Federal and state agencies just weren't interested–had no funds allocated for the project, and they didn't think much of the idea anyway.

We learned that we could probably have some small snook and tarpon caught in seines in some bay in Mexico, then put them in tanks and flown to Brownsville.

But that involved quite a bit of clams–and nobody had any money at that time, the middle of the big depression.

Hurt and Dave and I were thinking of doing the job ourselves–driving to Tampico, arranging for commercial fishermen to catch small tarpon and snook with seines, and lugging them back in tanks. The jostling on that rough road would be enough to properly

aerate the water for snook–and tarpon don’t need much aerating, since they take in a lot of air.

But about that time the Brownsville ship channel was started, and here came the snook and redfish and big speckled trout and small tarpon, following the dredge as it cut its way inland.

The fishing in the new channel was so good that we forgot about our landlocked snook and tarpon venture.

Now–after a time span of more than thirty years, the idea comes back to mind. And it takes on new and far more significant impact as I watch the spectacle of man moving the striped bass inland–into landlocked fresh water lakes.

I’ll play around with that idea later, after I’m through fishing. Right now let’s make a run at some waters that offered still another kind of tarpon fishing.

CHAPTER XIII

MAN-MADE TARPON HOLES

It is difficult to imagine finding something new in tarpon fishing after twenty years of ranging the home waters of this fish.

But I found something new, and only a hundred miles from my home at the time, Houston.

It would be better to say that I was led to this new kind of fishing by Felix Stagno, Houston guitar player and tackle salesman who was a fishing companion of mine at the time.

If the combination of guitar player and tackle salesman seems a bit unusual, go to Houston and check on other combinations of abilities in an effort to survive. Musicians in Houston are paid peanuts–about the same as newspapermen. So you run into a fine sax man who sells hurricane fences on the side, and a talented piano man who sells organs, which he hates.

That new fishing hole was the New Brazos, as the stretch of the Brazos River near the Gulf of Mexico is called. And people don't say New Brazos River–just New Brazos.

It is a man-made channel, a straight-line cut about six miles inland from the Gulf.

Tarpon were rolling there, and they came in what I considered the proper catching sizes, three to four feet. Fine on the light casting tackle we used in speckled trout fishing.

Felix started the seven-horse motor latched onto the stern panel of his ten-foot, canvas-covered cartop boat, and we cruised out near the tarpon, cut the motor, and drifted, with the wind, near enough to reach them.

We were using our "floating spoons," which I have mentioned before–three-eighths ounce metal spoons that we could make bounce and ski and gurgle along the surface.

We would let a spoon dip into the water now and then, producing a juicy gurgling sound as if something were dying. Fish love things in the process of dying–can't run away or fight back.

Both of us cast, something we never do if the tarpon are in the five- to six-foot class. We take it one at a time then, for the man who hangs such a tarpon is likely to need help in a hurry, mainly a chasing job with the motor at full rev.

The three-footers were no threat–just a prospective joy.

We got strikes. I lost mine but Felix stuck his, and after a lively fight of about fifteen minutes he brought it alongside and we eased out the little hook and released the fish.

Then I hung one. I didn't really need help, but Felix kept the motor running slowly, mainly with the idea of taking flight if the tarpon headed toward our boat. I lost the tarpon, but soon we were both latched onto others–and so it went. The *perfect* tarpon hole.

And man had created it. God bless man until the ugly after effects of his handiwork become obvious. Now and then man does something that seems really fine–

such as that tarpon hotspot. Sadly it seems that “tarpon shalt not long endure.” All too often what he does is undone –or he wishes that he could undo it.

That straight channel is nine feet deep and about two hundred yards wide. It was cut to prevent flooding around the town of Freeport, south of Houston, and to better provide the needs of petrochemical plants in that area.

It was fairly new when I first fished it–still had plenty of appeal to tarpon, which meant that food-bearing water was running–or creeping–down from the main river, attracting mullet and shrimp and other things that attract tarpon.

A new channel being dredged inland from the sea causes tarpon and many other gamefishes to act crazy, as I knew from fishing right behind the huge dredge that was cutting the Brownsville ship channel, back in the mid-1930s. I’ll tell you about that a bit later.

In such a channel as the New Brazos, tarpon deviate sharply from the pattern you accept as normal in waters not disturbed by man.

In the New Brazos there was no deep channel–there is in natural streams flowing into the sea. So no holes had been washed out by the current changing from side to side. The bottom was level, nine feet from bank to bank. The channel was in a straight line, something you do not find in nature.

Flow from the river, controlled way up the line and doled out in puny amounts, was not enough to cut a channel. In fact, much of the water in the New Brazos moves back and forth with the tide. As a result, a school of tarpon seldom remained in one spot very long. We moved with them. At one place, near the south shore of the river, we got

set to move when tarpon abandoned us–but not all of them did, as Felix discovered to his confusion.

Before starting the motor, he put his rod down on the stern panel. The spoon he was using was dangling in the water. I always fasten my lure to my reel when I am not fishing–but every man is entitled to his on pattern of handling his gear.

As the motor started, the spoon came to the surface, about six feet behind the boat, and began wobbling. And a tarpon blasted it.

Pretty doggone wild for a couple of minutes, as Felix tried to cut off the motor and grab his rod all at the same time. But the tarpon kicked free.

So the tarpon seemed to be confused. They seemed to be hunting here and there for a deep hole, a channel wash, a concentration of prey food. Since there were no big concentrations, the fish kept cruising about, running into small schools of prey food, then moving on again.

So we moved with them. We worked over the travelers, those tarpon obviously on the move from one spot to another. And did a neat job. As I recall it, we boated six tarpon, all under four feet, and were about to call it a day (we never bother to fish after noon) when along come a monster on the move.

"Take him," Felix said.

"After you, my dear Alphonse," I said. Sure, I would have got a kick out of a blast from the big fellow–and no man ever deliberately passes up a tarpon, no matter how big the fish or how frail the tackle.

But that was late in my tarpon career, whereas Felix, even though he had done far more fishing for speckled trout than I and was an expert in light tackle, had done relatively little tarpon fishing. once hooked now and then while fishing in some bay, or an occasional trip to an inlet.

Let him battle it.

The tarpon was heading for the mouth of the river. Felix decided he would *let* me have the honor of dedicating a lure to the tarpon, so he cruised parallel to the monster so I could flip the spoon out in front of it.

I put the spoon about four feet in front of his nose just as he rolled–and he latched on. And when he feel back to the water after a jump, he headed for the sea, which wasn't too far away.

Felix opened up the motor and got the little boat planing, so we could stay with the tarpon on the first big run. But my leader was only two feet long and I knew the tiny treble hooks on the spoon wouldn't take much gumming from the tarpon.

Then...then, even though Felix was urging me to hang on, I heard the rumbling of the surf and felt the first swell gently lift the boat. A bit farther out there would be nothing gentle about the manner in which those swells would lift that frail craft.

I clamped down and let the tarpon have the spoon.

And as Felix came about and headed upstream, there was a cracking sound from stem to stern and suddenly the bottom of that boat came bulging on up even with the rail, something no boat boat bottom should do.

The ribs of the boat, rotted by years of being soaked in the water and not entirely dried out, cracked along the little keel. But the boat held together as we limped on up the river to our starting point.

The New Brazos wasn't (and I use the past tense now since tarpon are gone from it) nearly as oddball as many other man-made channels and lakes that I have fished, although it did present a kind of tarpon fishing that was new to me, even after more than twenty years of pursuing the silver king.

Any time man creates a new fishing spot, freshwater or saltwater, strange and often delightful things are certain to happen.

In the Era of the Dam, most freshwater fishermen know just how sensational a new lake can be–and they learn how the "life cycle" of the lake is likely to be capsulated into a span of not more than ten years.

I've fished many such lakes, some huge, some small. I've fished them when they were brand new, when they were middle-age, and when they were in process of decay, insofar as fishing was concerned.

When a dam is built and water moves out over land, the abundance of life, much of it microscopic, causes seeming miracles to happen, as little fish and crustaceans move out over the land, then big gamefish move out in pursuit of the smaller creatures.

Fish grow at an astonishing rate–perhaps three or four times what is considered normal. And they usually strike as though each lure flung at them would be the last. They seem to lack caution, probably because of limited experience in dealing with lures.

I've caught big bass grazing around clumps of partially submerged prickly pear in a new lake near the Rio Grande–cactus bass, you could call them. And I've hauled fine fighting bass out from the interior of some old home partially submerged by rising waters of a new lake.

I've fished Texoma, a big lake on the Texas-Oklahoma line, and caught big bass fishing over what we called "Aunt Maggie's Peach Orchard." We could see the tops of the submerged peach trees.

Bass are caught on submerged railroad tracks–and at other dopey places. I've encountered them at lakes in Mexico, such as Don Martin, and at dozens of lakes in this country.

But that cycle...it seems inevitable. The rise, glory and decline, as of the Roman Empire, but during a capsuled time span. And after ten or fifteen years many of these fine new lakes are pretty punk fishing.

Some are even "killed," as aquatic biologists call it, and started new. The revived lake is seldom comparable to the original.

In contrast, the natural lakes seem to hold up, although it is true that as fishing becomes more concentrated, the fish learn more. So among the best lakes in Texas to this day is Caddo, on the Texas-Louisiana line. And it can hardly be called a natural lake now, since the retaining dam, once a natural obstacle, is being boosted now and the, raising the lake level.

Well, you find a similar situation when you move down to the sea in pursuit od tarpon and other saltwater gamefish.

The wildest fishing I can recall, except the Eighth Pass and Carmen in Mexico, was in the Brownsville ship channel while it was being dredged.

But for reasons which still puzzle me, it never could be considered a really top tarpon spot–schools now and then, but not predictable. That's why, twenty years later, I was surprised to find lively fishing for tarpon in the New Brazos.

But when that Brownsville ship channel was being dredged, smack across dry land ten feet above sea level, the things that happened were sort of miraculous in the world of the speckled trout, redfish, snook, and even flounder.

And the fishing held up for almost ten years, partly because oil did not figure in the early operations of the port, and even dry cargo traffic was puny–a couple of freighters a week. And there was no DDT then.

This was i sharp contrast to most other ship channels dredge in the country–or perhaps I should say deepened, because they were channels or canals of some sort before being dredged deeper.

A tremendous amount of tiny plant and animal life must have been loosened by the dredge as it cut inland, and for several years the drain off from the relatively flat land, through drainage canals, brought still more plant and animal life in minute form.

At any rate, crustaceans and tiny fish follow the dredge inland, and larger fish followed them–and we followed the dredge. We sort of haunted it, for the best fishing, as yo might expect, was in or along the line between clear and murky water, near the dredge.

Looking back, I am puzzled most by the sudden blossoming of spectacular snook fishing. The only snook we had seen prior to dredging of the channel were in Mexico. We didn't even call them snook–they were "pike" to us,because of that underslung lower jaw.

Suddenly they were swarming in the channel–and they began using that as a sort of base, spreading on out into the bay waters. Everybody was delighted, particularly the commercial fishermen who were dragging seines (illegally) in the bay.

Why did those snook suddenly cross the Rio Grande because of that channel?

I know a few snook are taken farther north along the Texas coast. But only a loner now and then, whereas millions of them moved into the Laguna Madre north of the Rio Grande when the channel was built.

And all were large–from seven to eight pounds up. I never saw a small snook north of the Rio Grande, just as I never saw a baby tarpon north of it.

And another kind of fish came breezing in–the skipjack.

Like the tarpon, the skipjack is not considered a food fish. And like the tarpon, it leaps when hooked–it goes wild. If skipjacks averaged four pounds instead of less than two, they would be great gamefish. And in some parts of tropical waters–such as Carmen–they do average close to four pounds.

Most anglers avoid them. I like them. And I had plenty to give me action for several years after the ship channel at Brownsville was dredged. Then they sort of fizzled out.

The fish that we call a skip jack is usually called a tenpounder or ladyfish in Florida, where many show up. Both names sound a bit silly, since a ten-pounder would be a freak and half the fish are gentlemen, not ladies.

But it's okay with me. All I'm curious about is the sudden appearance of great schools of pretty fair-sized skipjacks just as the ship channel was being finished, then the fadeout of the fish.

Snook lingered around longer, but most of those that did hid under the docks in the turning basin and refused to strike lures. Got smart, like the snook along the banks of the Panuco.

These moved when traffic in oil began fouling up the water–that is, most of them moved. Some waited too long and were killed by cold during one of the rare prolonged hard freezes in that area.

I guess the flounder had been there all along, since you catch (mainly by spearing) them all along the Gulf coast. All the channel did was cause them to concentrate–and to strike lures. We really couldn't get lures to them in the shallow flats where they usually bedded down to wait for food. In the channel we could. We trolled until one hit, then stopped and cast. Real nice fishing for a few years, until age set in and the channel grew weary.

The glory days of tarpon fishing in the Brownsville channel were even briefer. Schools moved in and out when the channel was new.

Now and then we would see them and get some action.

But nothing to compare with the New Brazos twenty years later. At the time we figured the ship traffic scared tarpon out of the channel. There is no ship traffic in the New Brazos. Maybe we were wrong.

I'll let somebody else figure out why they moved into the Brownsville ship channel, took a look for a time, then departed, especially since snook, with habits much the same as the tarpon, stayed for a long time.

CHAPTER XIV

ROLLERS ON THE ROCKS

A big swell would lift our sixteen-foot outboard rig high in the air, then deposit us in the trough, eight or ten feet lower. Then another wave.

And a mere forty yards away were the twenty-ton granite blocks that formed the jetty. Rollers ran on into them, after slipping under us, then–CRASH! And spray flew over the few anglers stupid enough to stand on the rocks and fish.

Understand why I've done little fishing around jetties?

But the tarpon were there, big fellows, and for some dopey reason–maybe home town loyalty–Dave and I considered it our duty to fish for those tarpon so that we might make a contribution to the Port Isabel Tarpon Rodeo–the second one tho be staged.

I have been assured by physicists that waves do not cause water to move horizontally unless they crest–or are near land, in which case rollers move inland a bit, then pile up water as they wash back.

So even if waves are not cresting, the water level along a surf will be higher that the level miles out to sea. If waves are mighty and cresting, which happens when a hurricane drives the water, then the tide along shore may rise eight or ten feet.

But normal waves are just water moving up and down, the physicists tell me. Same effect as that on air when sound waves move through it–no horizontal movement of the air.

But you try to sell that story two a couple of guys in a light bat being bounced around by big but non-cresting rollers and see how much luck you have.

"I don't like it worth a damn," I told Dave.

"I don't either," he said. "If we can't hang one in a few minutes, let's get the hell away from these rocks."

So dave hung one in a hurry.

He banged his monster plug, one made for muskies, against a rock and it dropped near a tarpon, which immediately latched on. In those days, 1936-39, no really good tarpon plugs were being made. So in the rodeo, because we really were anxious to land any big fish we hung, Dave and I used what would be considered light surf tackle–a reel that held more than 250 yards of nine-thread linen line (27-pound test), and long rods. We had to use a heavy plug to cast with that gear.

I headed away from the jetty as soon as Dave stuck the six-foot tarpon,and we had a noble battle. Remember, that was in the early days of my tarpon fishing, when actually boating a six-footer was a big event–for me as well as for the rodeo promoters.

But we paid the penalty of using leaders only two feet long. The tarpon, after a twenty-minute battle, managed to roll up in the line and cut it back of the leader. The man who trolls near the rocks has a big advantage–he can use a six- or seven-foot leader.

You can't cast with that kind of leader, especially if you're squatting down in a little boat being bounced in waves.

And if you must troll, I'd rather make the hop to Mexico's Pacific coast, where I can take billfish–and occasionally big dolphin and big roosterfish. And you don't have to continue trolling if you hang a big dolphin or roosterfish. They usually move in big schools, so you can stop and cast, once you get a strike.

The wind began picking up and we noticed some of the rollers were beginning to feather at the top. So we abandoned the jetty.

Anyway, Dave and I had something better in mind, something I'll explain in detail in the next chapter, for it concerns a kind of trickery in fishing that might help anglers in many situations–even on bass and crappie.

But I've been back to the rocks again and again–always because of somebody else, not I wanted to catch big tarpon there.

And I've fished smack in the surf where the rollers were curling over and crashing–because somebody else wanted to fish there.

So maybe I should at least tell a few of highlights.

I got a call one day from Peter Barrett, outdoors editor of *True Magazine*, for which I was writing regularly at the time.

Pete and Emmett Gowen, another outdoor writer, had gone to Port Aransas, Texas, as guests of the people in what was once called the Tarpon Capital of the World.

But they had gone to fish for billfish, not tarpon. The billfish boom was underway then–and the tarpon boom on its way out. The Port Aransas Tarpon Rodeo had been changed to the Port Aransas Deep Sea Roundup.

It was still pretty good tarpon fishing spot when Pete called me. But that was about sixteen years ago, and tarpon fishing along much of the coast ranged from fair to punk. The decline had set in.

“Our hosts are killing us with kindness,” Pete told me, “but we’re not catching any fish.”

“What are you fishing for?” I asked. I didn’t even know Pete and Emmett were at Port Aransas.

“We’ve been roaming the Gulf fifty miles out trying to raise sails and marlin,” Pete said. “Got a fine offshore cruiser, but it is rough as hell out there and we haven’t seen fish.”

“They’re out there,” I said. “Just hard to see them when the water’s rough.”

“Well, we want to switch to something we can see,” Pete said. “Plenty of tarpon around the end of the jetties and in the surf. How about coming down and helping us?”

I was living in Houston at the time.

“There are dozens of people there who know more about tarpon fishing than I’ll ever know,” I told Pete. “See Barney Farley. He’s the grandpa of the guides–the best.”

What I didn’t tell him was that I don’t give a damn for tarpon fishing around jetties or in the surf. Pete insisted, so I drove on down and was astounded when those

two wild men insisted that we breeze out through the pass and fish the surf right then–close to noon.

"That pass is rugged for little boats after the wind comes up," I said. Along the Gulf coast you can usually expect the wind to start building up around 9 or 10 in the morning. "And the surf's sure rough."

"I got a boat that can take it," Emmett said.

And he did have a really fine rig–a 22-foot boat with a 60-horsepower outboard latched into it. So I said okay, let's go get swamped or rolled up in a swell, if that's what they wanted.

If you're going to fish the surf from a boat, you've got to get right in as close to shore as possible in order to reach the fish. Breaking waves cause a lot of commotion–if the water is clear you can sometimes see mullet or trout or redfish racing along in a swell as it rises and thins out before spilling over.

And we saw tarpon–big ones.

Pete's gear wasn't worth a hoot for casting, and Emmett's wasn't much better. I don't think either of them had done much tarpon fishing before. So I took the motor and handed my gear to Pete. He got off a nice cast, fairly close to a couple of tarpon. When he didn't get action he began reeling the lure in rapidly–and a monster blasted into it right smack at the stern of the boat, less than six feet away.

All of a sudden I could see Pete "listening" to some of the things I had written for *True*. He hung two more big ones, way out near the end of his cast, but they shook lose.

Emmett wasn't having much luck, so he kept urging me to get in close to the breakers. He couldn't cast far enough with his rig.

I suggested an alternative–change rigs with Pete. Use mine.

I've had some experiences in those breakers that I do not intend to repeat. I've fished the surf with a couple of mad men–but I never go out with the same mad man twice, and you can't always tell in advance.

A couple of years before our trip I was fiddling around just outside the breakers with just such a mad man. I'll call him Buckshot, which wasn't his name–and, incidentally, it is only the second phony name used in this book. All the others are real.

Buckshot talked me into working the surf for tarpon and other fish because he is a fine piano man, and I am such a music buff that I can't turn down a musician.

He was running the boat–his boat.

I kept trying to get him to stay outside the swells before they started building up to the inevitable crash landing. Buckshot wasn't hearing my kind of music. Mad man.

So I cast at a tarpon I saw in a roller that was in the process of building up, and the tarpon was gentleman enough to latch on. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Buckshot getting ready to cast! He was steering the boat with his left foot as he stood up to cast.

"Don't cast!" I shouted.

I was too late. He hung a tarpon and started yelling and whopping–and forgot about the motor. Wind whipped the bow around toward shore and as we went racing in

toward land a big wave crashed over us, swamping the boat. Up onto the sand–and another wave crashed over us.

You won't believe what Buckshot did, not even if you had seen it. The idiot hung a tarpon (I lost mine in the confusion), and the minute the boat grounded he climbed out and began following the fish along the shore, paying no attention to me or and the boat.

You can beat down a really big tarpon in the surf if you have about three hundred yards of line, even if it is quite light. For a hooked tarpon is extremely reluctant to get outside the rollers for fear of sharks.

Buckshot whipped that one down.

I bailed out the boat ad sat waiting for him. We managed to get the craft through the breakers and back into the surf, whereupon I took the motor and told Buckshot I would be his guide from then on. I stayed away from the breakers–and never fished with Buckshot again.

Pete and Emmett are quite reasonable and sensible about fishing, and the trip with them was enjoyable but too short. When I refused to get too close to the breakers, they understood.

And the following day we set forth with the "Guiding Hand," venerable Barney Farley, along with us, in his own small but quite adequate offshore cruiser.

Barney was way along in years then. He achieved fame because he was the guide standing beside President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the big tarpon, back in the mid-1930s.

He went out with us as a sort of accommodation, for he had quite active guiding.

And, of course, Emmett and Pete got the kind of action they had come to get. And they got it at the spot that I disliked even more than the surf–over the submerged rocks at the end of the huge rock jetty.

If there are any tarpon near an inlet that has jetties, the surest spot is right at the tip, where water dislodges and cracks (yes, I mean cracks) some of the big stones during storms.

But...if you cast there you are almost certain to eventually hang one of those submerged rocks. And if you troll around the point you get banged by cross currents and crisscross waves.

You can have it.

I saw Pete once after that, in New York. And saw Emmett sever years later, when he stopped in Houston on his way south to set up a fishing operation on an island near the border of Mexico and Guatemala.

Last I heard he was doing fine.

Although fishing from a jetty is not my brand of booze, I'll tell you something about it. I guess I should try to avoid gaps in the story of tarpon fishing.

I have, on about a dozen occasions, fished from the top of jetties for tarpon.

It's a nice way to slowly melt down. Tarpon come to the Texas coast in the spring and leave in the fall. They're warm weather fish. So you stand on sizzling rocks in a blazing sun and cast.

When you hang a tarpon, chances are you can whip him down if you have 250 yards of line, and it doesn't have to be heavy line. For the fish is likely to stay reasonably close to the rocks, and all you need do is stay parallel with him and slowly work him down.

The tarpon goes out to the end of the jetty, rounds the point, comes back a way on the other side, then goes through the same routine again. Like a tarpon hooked in the surf, he seldom ventures far out. Probably fear of sharks and porpoise.

And if you insist on using "porpoises" as the plural, which Mr. Webster advises, go right ahead. Mr. Webster also lists "tarpons" as the plural of tarpon. You say "tarpons" to a fisherman and he'll think you're out of your cotton-picking mind.

Marine biologists say that porpoise do not feed on tarpon–that they feed almost exclusively on menhaden at least in my part of the world. I never argue with marine biologists. I just put down here what I have seen–at least a dozen tarpon killed by porpoise. Maybe the porpoise are killing for fun, and it really seems that way at times, since a porpoise is likely to bounce a tarpon in the air for a bit before cutting it in two.

I doubt that fun business. Only *Homo sapiens* kills for fun. I have a hunch that a mountain lion, forced to leap on a big buck deer to ease severe hunger, thinks, "What a crummy break, getting my ribs banged in by those big antlers. Why the hell didn't a fawn or a sick doe come along."

Anyway, you follow your tarpon, putting on pressure all the time until he turns on his side, the signal of defeat. What do you do then?

Me, I break loose, for the only safe, sane way to land the fish is to guide it all the way back to the surf, maybe a half mile away, and beach it, something I won't do. If you go down on those rocks to take out the hooks or to get your tarpon and lug it back as a symbol of victory, you're really inviting disaster.

Those rocks are slippery.

So I make you a present of jetty fishing for tarpon and move on to something more to my liking.

CHAPTER XV

WHERE THE TWAIN SHALL MEET

If you had watched Hurt Batsell and me that day, you might have concluded that we had been in the sun too long.

Casting lures into water so soupy that a self-respecting mud turtle would abandon it. How could a fish that feeds by sight, not smell, locate a lure in that muddy water?

But if you had hung around for a spell, you would have understood the logic of our "mud casting." For you would have noticed what we were looking for–a big silvery fish flash out of the muddy water, leaving below him a "hole" of clear blue water.

I know it sounds nutty. But anglers often pass up surprisingly fine fishing because they do not devote enough thought and study and experimenting to the things that happen when clear water and muddy water meet. And I mean horizontally or vertically or slantwise. Take your choice.

Muddy water pouring out of the Rio Grande and clear blue water of the Gulf had both a horizontal and vertical relationship the day Hurt and I were fishing the mud. We started the day in search of king mackerel, which Texans usually call kingfish.

Quite a few other fishermen were there, trolling along the line, clearly but irregularly defined, where muddy water and clear water met. The line was shoved this way and that by waves and wind, so it was quite irregular. But clearly defined.

River water moving northward, because of the rather light Gulf current (not the Gulf Stream) at that point. And as the river water moved northward, it fanned out, finally fading away five or six miles northeast of the mouth of the river.

The other anglers trolling, in the clear water but near the line, and catching plenty of kings. Hurt and I would troll until we had a strike, then stop and cast. The kings, which ranged from five to twenty pounds, put up a real fine battle, and they hit the lures freely, although our arms were wearing out because we had to retrieve so fast.

We followed the line on toward the mouth of the Rio Grande, then we noticed some action about a hundred yards from the line–in the murky water.

Tarpon were rolling. It was difficult to believe. That was in the early days of our tarpon fishing, and we had never seen the silver king in water so murky that a plug four inches away could be invisible.

The tarpon were doing more than merely rolling. Now and then one would strike–and we saw one bounce a mullet in the air on the strike.

All of a sudden we abandoned the king mackerel to their fate and cruised out in the soupy water. As we did, I looked back and saw that the prop of the outboard was churning up clear water. There was only a layer, probably six or eight inches think, of muddy freshwater lying on top of the blue Gulf water. It takes time for freshwater running into a bay or gulf to be assimilated into the saltwater, which is heavier.

Well, mullet, which frequently hunt murky water for protection against predators, were fiddling around in that six or eight inches of river water, and tarpon were down below them, waiting for a fin to show.

All very nice–except that we got absolutely no action during a half hour of fishing. We tried floaters. Nothing. And various lures that dug down. Still nothing.

Then I recalled a trick Dave Young used several years before that in taking fish when he and I were casting into the Rio Grande near its mouth. There was a thin film of murky water on top of the clear water–but no thick layer of really soupy water such as hurt and I encountered out in the Gulf.

When Dave and I wore our arms off casting without getting a strike, he finally reversed the little metal "bib" at the front end of his lure, the gadget put there to make the lure dig down and wobble.

We were using lures made for king mackerel–first really good tarpon lures we had been able to get.

So Dave would cast out and reel in rapidly, keeping the lure at or close to the surface, although part of it, mainly the tail hooks, would flash just below the film of murky water now and then.

We got wild action.

Hurt and I were either working lures in the muddy water, which meant that tarpon couldn't see them, or letting the lures dig down below that film and be clearly visible in the crystal clear blue water.

Tarpon are not suckers. Once a lure dug down below the film, they could see that it wasn't a mullet. So I reversed the bib or lip on my lure. It took a bit of experimenting to bring the lure in so that the tail hooks would flash below the film now and then.

Then it was bingo! And bingo! And Bingo!

Hurt thought it was pretty dopey–until he reversed the bib on his plug and hung a five-footer. That converted him.

I'm going to digress for a moment and pass along to anglers a few fundamentals in fishing where waters of a different kind–fresh and salt, murky and clear, etc.–meet. And I talk about other fish as well as tarpon.

It is at such meeting in places that the finest of all fishing is likely available, if the angler will study the situation and make adjustments.

Most people, even the so-called experts, are likely to go through the same old routine. And sometimes be greatly embarrassed when some novice has fine luck simply because he does the unexpected–for example, those dumb fishermen at the Eighth Pass who showed us how to catch snook because they were punk at casting and had backlashes.

Since the switch from regular casting tackle to spinning gear threatens to eliminate the backlash from fishing, we can ignore it as a "technique" for taking fish. But you can experiment even if you don't have backlashes.

Probably the most freakish experience I ever had in using what seemed to be a nutty technique took place on the Brownsville ship channel four or five years after it was dredged, when its days of glory were beginning to fade.

And small tarpon figured in that experience, along with snook and trout–my kind of trout (saltwater), not rainbows. Seeing tarpon surprised me–they seldom showed in the channel at that time.

We had been told that fish assembled at a point where there was a small flow of water into the channel from a drain ditch. The drain ditches carried off excess irrigation water, so there was quite a bit of life in the water.

We were also told that the fish would not strike.

Of course we didn't believe that, just as Hurt didn't believe Dave and me when we told hi that the tarpon in the big bend of the Rio Grande would take nothing but plugs on the bottom. So we set forth, determined to *make* those fish strike.

We didn't. At least not for an hour. It was maddening. Big specks would plop at the surface, snook would slash, and now and then a small tarpon–catching size–would blast.

They completely ignored our lures, even though we used everything we had, at the surface and below it.

We had just got a new kind of lure, one which seemed worthless to us. It was small–three-eighths ounce–plug that had practically no action, regardless how you worked it. No bib under the snout–not even a notch. Just a piece of painted wood vaguely resembling a tiny fish in shape.

Since nothing else worked, I tied on one of the things.

We stood about twelve feet above the water level, since the bank was elevated at the drain ditch. So I cast beyond the feeding fish and brought the lure in fast, making no attempt to give it action. I just had it skimming along the surface with the tiny tail hooks flashing down below the then layer of fresh, and slightly murky, water coming out of the drain ditch.

I had four strikes on that one cast. Fish miss a lure at the surface moving that fast. But on the next cast I hung a five-pound speck, and Hurt and Dave quickly tied on similar lures and soon we were in business.

Why?

For the same reason that Hurt and I hung those tarpon under the layer of muddy fresh water off the mouth of the Rio Grande. We were showing the trout and snook and tarpon a momentary flash of the tail hooks now and then as the lure raced along.

It served. And when I began watching more carefully, I realized why. From time to time a school of tiny fish–I do not know what kind–would come out of the drain ditch, where they had been feeding, and make a mad dash for the other side of the ship channel, where the murky water was being driven by the wind.

When those little fellows came out, there was action.

And we managed to duplicate it.

We missed most of our strikes, but wound up with a total of only six snook, real nice ones, eight specks, and two small tarpon.

We had scored a moral victory. We *made* those fish strike.

Those experiences and others convince me that anglers can *make* "inland" tarpon and snook strike, if these fine game fish are ever brought inland, something I have talked about and will mention again before I sign off.

I don't believe those landlocked tarpon and snook in my pet *resaca* at Brownsville could whip me down now the way they did more than thirty years ago.

Dave and Hurt and I got action at the mouth of that drain ditch because we duplicated the action of the tiny fish on which the gamefish were feeding.

You get action where the waters meet–if you know how.

I've caught white bass that way when I couldn't take them any other way. And black bass at the mouth of a tiny creek. And huge rainbow trout way up in a mountain lake in Mexico where a dinky stream lazily edged into the lake.

Quite often you get a reverse situation if the waters meet horizontally, or slantwise, instead of vertically.

Then you may have to cast into clear water and nudge your lure into murky water. You find that situation often when bay and gulf waters, both salty, meet.

That was the problem Dr. Dean and Bink Goodrich and I faced when we managed to hang tarpon and snook at Carmen. It was the situation when Dan Holland and the rest of us hung all those snook and tarpon at the Eighth Pass.

I think the most unusual example of action where bay and gulf waters meet took place on a trip Russell Lee of Austin and I made to Port Aransas, back when the silver king's glory was barely tarnished.

Russ and I have made many fishing trip together, although mostly fresh water, which he prefers. But there have been saltwater trips, especially some memorable aunts far down the Baa California peninsula in Mexico–back in the days when sportsfishing was relatively new there.

I got word that tarpon were pretty active in a little cove just inside the south jetty at Port Aransas. They could be reached by casting–and from the sandy beach, not the burning hot jetties–I was told.

So Russ and I made a run there, and he was properly excited, since tarpon fishing was new to him then.

This little cove may be gone now. I don't know. The contours of the shore in and around the passes changes, sometimes as a result of hurricanes. But in earlier days quite a few records for tarpon fishing–most in a day by one angler–were set and broken in or near that cove.

I've forgotten exact figures, but it seems to me one angler landed seventeen tarpon in a day. And I mean big ones around six feet.

It was the general practice then to take a scale from a tarpon and release him. So along the walls of the famed Tarpon Inn were hundreds of tarpon scales–"trophies"–with the name of the angler and the date and the weight of the fish.

Of course those tremendous catches were made by fishermen using huge tackle and trolling mullet. You could whip a six-footer down in ten minutes–even less if the boatman did a little dragging, which he usually did.

And the record catches were made back in the days when only a few "crazy people" fished for tarpon. A man trying to set a record was practically certain to have the show all to himself. Throw fifty other anglers into the scramble and see how many tarpon one person might catch.

Russ and I got there at exactly the right time–tarpon action in that cove, and they were near enough for us to reach from shore.

But–the same old sad sack story. They wouldn't strike.

So we began studying the situation. We walked to the base of the jetty and saw that schools of mullet were moving through the inlet and into the bay. But when they rounded the point of land beyond which the tide had scoured out the cove, they would make a wild dash across the cove to achieve safety in shallow water on the other side of it–up the bay a bit.

"We'll do what they're doing," I suggested to Russ.

So we cast out, right in the middle of a school of mullet rounding the point, and let the fast tide rip carry our lures, nudging the, a bit to keep pace with the mullet.

As the plugs came around the point, they moved from clear gulf water into bay water slightly murky because the tide rip scoured the sandy bottom.

And as the plugs moved–the silver kings struck.

Several tarpon we hung were too big to check. They just went right on out in the bay, flapping a final goodbye at the end of the line. Or just before the end. Never again do I let a big fish run off all my line.

But we landed four tarpon in the five-foot class, which was plenty of adventure for Russ and a lot of fun for me.

I think about that trip, and about the others that called for unusual techniques, because the tarpon fishermen of the future is going to be forced to learn a lot more about the ways of this great game fish if he expects to hang one now and then.

And, of course, we are rapidly approaching a situation in which a man might say, with pride, "I caught a big tarpon once," just as a man might have said, twenty years ago, "I shot a lion."

But before the mourning session, let's make one more trip to a spot where there were plenty of tarpon–but they wouldn't strike.

CHAPTER XVI

FAREWELL TO THE RIO GRANDE

I followed the trail of the silver king for ten years after my farewell to the Rio Grande.

But I choose to wind up the action part of this book with an account of that last trip, mainly because of the memories the trip brought back–memories of the beginning and events along the way to the end.

It was a last trip in more ways than one.

It was my last tarpon fishing trip with Dave and Hurt. All of us knew that, although nothing was said about it at the time–except that the days of glory of tarpon fishing in the Rio Grande were drawing to a close.

I phoned Dave from Houston, where I was living at the time, and arranged the trip. He said there were plenty of tarpon in what we called the Highway Bend, but added, “They won’t strike.”

“I guess I don’t need to ask why...”

“The turistas,” Dave said. “Tarpon struck fine for three or four weeks after they came into the river. But with twenty or thirty boats out at every hole–they finally quit.”

“Well, I’d just like to see them roll,” I said. “Anyway, I want to go across the river and get some cabrito and guacamole and tequila...”

"I'll arrange it," Dave said.

And we went across the river to Matamoros and had cabrito and guacamole and tequila at our old stand, The Texas Bar. Of course Hurt didn't go with us. He won't eat cabrito and he doesn't drink.

Even the tequila brought back memories–from way back, when I was in my teens. I recalled the delightful experience of getting a dime change on each nickel I put down on the bar for a shot of tequila. It was a little bar, far from the tourist traps, and I was the only gringo in it.

Getting that dime change for a nickel seemed such a beautiful way to accumulate money that I could hardly walk out of the bar by the time I thought the rate of exchange–four to one at that time–and realized I wasn't actually making money.

But it was fun.

So was the trip to Highway Bend the next day–and as we approached it Dave and I recalled the "sleeper" we had encountered there years before. A five-foot tarpon, a loner, lying near the bluff on which we stood–and way down deep.

And he paid no attention to the lovely lures we brought right past his snout. Finally Dave got disgusted and said, "I'll wake him up," and proceeded to cast over the tarpon, bring the big plug back and drive a hook in the fish's body.

He got action, all right–and a scale for a souvenir.

I have wished many times since then that we had merely waited in order to see how often the tarpon had to come up for air. I still don't know–and apparently nobody else bothers to find out.

We didn't wait.

And mentioning the sleeper brought back still another memory–the tarpon that I "walked to death," as Hurt said at the time. He sure was glad I walked it to death, for I had the doggone thing hooked on top, right back of the head, and I *had* to land it to keep Hurt's River Rodeo from being a disaster.

I've mentioned that Hurt ran a tackle store. When he noted the spectacular achievements in the early tarpon rodeos at Port Isabel, then elsewhere on up the Texas coast, he decided to throw a River Rodeo at the mouth of the Rio Grande.

He got permission to use three small boats to take anglers across the river–but only at the mouth.

Tarpon were there and they were striking, mostly right up close to the shore on the Mexican side. But anglers began wading out a little splashing and whooping things up, and after five or six big ones had danced on out to sea carrying plugs–or mullet–the fish quit striking.

I moved on up stream a bit, looking for a traveler–a tarpon on the move. I spotted one and he hit. On the first jump he threw the plug, but it flew beyond him a bit, and when I struck I slammed it into him just back of the head and a hook took hold.

A foul-hooked tarpon can be a boring creature. He won't jump, he won't make a flashy run, he just dogs it on and on, about the way a huge jewfish would.

I had barely enough line–25-pound-test silk–to reach to shallow water on the far side of the river. And since the line had undoubtedly weakened to about 15-pound-test near the leader, about all I could do was stay parallel with the fish.

So it was back and forth, upstream, then downstream. He wouldn't go on out into the Gulf, which he could easily have done, because the wild Indians gathered there at the mouth scared him back.

After an hour my hands began cramping. I was using an oversize version of an ordinary freshwater reel–no internal drag. I had to apply pressure with my thumb, or both thumbs. And they were protected by knitted stalls.

An hour and a half I decided to clamp down and let him break loose. But I heard the buzz of an outboard motor, and here came Hurt toward me.

"land him for me," Hurt pleaded. "Nobody has caught one yet. And the reports and photographers..."

"I'll try," I said.

Two hours and the trail I was walking, back and forth, began getting deeper. Three hours and I couldn't take it anymore. I got a grip on the sand with my feet and clamped down with both thumbs–on the sides of the reel spool, not on that tiny bit of line left on the reel.

I guess it was pretty funny, me and that tarpon doing our tug-of-war. he would thrust with his broad tail, trying to surge forward, and I would lean way over as far as I could without falling, but I wouldn't give him an inch of line. When he stopped and sighed, maybe sticking his nose up just enough to get a breath of air, I would work on him, getting back four or five feet of line.

Then another surge. The fragile, worn line held.

Finally, after a sort of token thrust, he gave up–I could turn him against his will. Once you turn the head of a big fish your way, you've got him whipped.

Slowly, gently I pumped him on in. He never did turn on his side, signal of complete defeat, because I had not been able to work on him hard enough. So when his belly touched sand near shore, I made a dash at him and stuck my right hand under a gill flap. I could easily have lost him if I had let him alone, for with solid ground to help, he might have made a lunge violent enough to break the line.

As I slid him up to safety, I heard the buzz of an outboard motor. It was Hurt. He ain't no greek, but he was bearing a gift, a noble gift. For just as I sort of sagged down on the sand, letting my tackle slide out of my hands as though I would never use it again, Hurt pitched a bottle of tequila on the beach beside me.

Yes, a truly noble gesture. After three solid pulls I took in a deep breath, like a tarpon rolling, picked up my tackle and started looking for another traveler.

How long does it take to land a tarpon? From three seconds to three hours. Yes, I landed a tarpon, a big one, in three seconds–and at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Another memory.

He came storming at my plug just as I was getting ready to lift it out of the water, about six feet from shore. He lunged in the air the instant he slammed his jaws shut on the plug. He was pointed my way, so when I leaned into him hard–I had fairly hefty tackle that day–here he came, right out onto solid land.

The plug jerked free–but I *landed* my tarpon.

That day, that last journey to the river where the Silver King and I were introduced, the three of us fished from one boat, which we seldom do when working tarpon holed up in a bend of a river.

But Hurt had a solid 18-foot boat, quite a contrast to the 10-foot car-top rigs we had used in the past. Also we knew each other–complete confidence. It's the stranger that I dread to fish with in a small boat surrounded by tarpon.

Dave was right–they wouldn't strike.

And I mean they wouldn't pay attention to plugs on top, anywhere between top and bottom, or on the bottom. All the old tricks failed.

We sat for a moment, each knowing what the others were thinking. Should we try what we called the Panuco Panic? The trick we learned years before in the Panuco–and, as you might expect, because of a backlash.

"He ought to have something to remember," Dave said to Hurt–talking about me.

"Okay," Hurt said, as he put his gear down and picked up a paddle, ready to defend himself. "Your honor."

He was talking to me. No anglers are crazy enough to have more that one lure at a time in the water when indulging in the Panuco Panic.

So I let my fast-sinking lure go straight down, although as always, it didn't seem to be going straight down. Even though the rod tip was six feet from the boat, the line seemed to be slanting in right under the boat.

I gave it the works.

In the Panuco Panic, you rest the plug a moment on the bottom, right under the boat, then instead of nudging, you reel rapidly until the plug is five or six feet from the bottom. Then you pause and give one little jiggle and reel rapidly again for four or five feet.

Keep doing that until you bring the lure to the surface. And as my plug neared the surface that day I saw the huge, open mouth of a tarpon right below it. He wasn't more than eight feet from me and he was staring at me as he slammed his mighty jaws shut.

I guess I got scared. Anyway, I jerked the plug out of his mouth just as he slammed his jaws shut. I *refused* to let him have my plug.

He came on up in the air anyway. Real fine sight.

Then it was Dave's turn. He hung his tarpon but he lost it one the first jump.

Each time we raised a tarpon, we moved the boat a little–using paddles, not the motor. There was no wind that early in the day to cause a drift.

Now it was Hurt's turn.

I knew he didn't like that sort of nonsense at all. But–it was my farewell trip. So down went his lure–and up came a tarpon.

And that one, a five-footer, came arching over the little boat and fell smack in Hurt's lap.

I guess Dave and I have had more memory laughs about that than any other experience in our years of fishing together, but it was a long time before Hurt saw the humor of it.

What would you do with a completely green, five-foot tarpon flailing wildly in your lap, banging a pig plug around, knocking over the tackle boxes and creating hell generally?

Well, Hurt said, “Shoo! Shoo Tarpon!”

You’d figure he was telling a chicken to go away.

And he kept making little motions with his hands as though he was going to push the tarpon over the side, yet he wouldn’t touch it.

Hurt Batsell has about as much courage, physical and moral, as any man I’ve known. But he has always been squeamish about touching fish that are alive–or even dead ones. He’ll go hungry before he cleans one.

So he was making those little gestures, without touching the fish. It finally bounced over the side and took off. Hurt grabbed his tackle just before it was jerked into the water, and, crazy as it seems, boated the tarpon. Dave carefully released it.

Then I boated one about the same size. As Dave held it with the big pliers we carry for the purpose, he said, “Want a scale for a souvenir?”

“No. Biologists say a fungus is likely to set in where the scale was pulled off,” I said.

“Aw, what the hell, pollution and stopping the flow of water will kill them anyway. Have a scale on me.”

He jerked off a scale, using small pliers, and handed it to me, then released the fish. Later each of us wrote his name on the scale–and the date and place.

I was going to keep it. But somewhere along the line it got lost. I'm not the pack-rat type–what I specialize in keeping is memories.

And that trip was a memory.

Dave landed a tarpon in a short time, then the three of us landed three more. Pretty wild fishing–and no more tarpon in the boat.

And now? No more tarpon...well, let's talk about maybe bringing tarpon back into rivers.

Hell, let's go whole hog and put them in lakes.

CHAPTER XVII

BRING 'EM INLAND

While I was writing the previous chapter, about my farewell to the Rio Grande, I got to thinking about those landlocked tarpon in *my resaca* at Brownsville more than thirty years before.

Then I suddenly brought up short by a story in the paper about a man landing a fifteen-pound striped bass in a Texas Lake.

Aha! Maybe I wasn't as much of a dreamer back in the 1930s as some people thought. Suddenly an old, discarded idea came galloping back, demanding reassessment.

If they can bring the striped bass inland–and obviously they can–how about tarpon? And maybe snook? Maybe that's the way to save these fish if conditions in their home waters continue getting worse.

I called a longtime friend, Marion Toole, director of inland fisheries of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Service.

Toole was in the process of clearing out his desk, getting ready to retire to the cabin he had built on a nearby lake. I hadn't seen him in several years, because I had been doing no writing about the great outdoors.

"What about those striped bass in lakes here in Texas," I asked.

“It’s for real, judging by the way things are going now,” Toole said. “They’re taking hold in four or five lakes in the eastern part of the state. Plenty of stripers around five and six pounds now, and occasionally one over ten pounds.”

“What do fishermen think when they catch one,” I asked.

“A lot of them think they’re catching white bass,” he said. “But they find out when they eat the fish–stripers are better.”

The white bass actually is a freshwater variation of striped bass–a subspecies that developed when striper were trapped up rivers now and then in the dim distant past.

The fish look alike and they school up and feed and act a lot alike, one of the major differences being in size. Stripers get up to sixty pounds and more, whereas a five-pound white bass is quite unusual. Mostly they’re little fellows, from two pounds down.

So quite naturally an angler not in on the doings of the aquatic biologists would get bug-eyed when he caught a fifteen-pound “white bass.” There ain’t no such animal.

“I’m think now about tarpon and snook,” I told Toole. “I know they get along fine in fresh, landlocked basins, but I’m wondering about reproduction. Do the stripers reproduce in lakes?”

Toole said the chances are they will never reproduce satisfactorily in lakes.

“White bass fight their way up to the headwaters of streams that flow into lakes,” he said.

“How well I know,” I told him. “I’ve had plenty of wild fishing there.”

“They spawn in fast running water, but the eggs of the white bass settle immediately to the bottom and stick like glue to rocks. They’re washed by the water and hatch.

“Not the same with stripers. They spawn in rivers, all right. But they need flotation for the eggs–must float, between bottom and top of a flowing stream, for two or three days before they hatch.

“You don’t find much of that kind of water in the streams that keep our lakes full.”

“So what do you do?”

“Do their love making for them, the same as biologists have been doing with rainbow trout and some other fish for years,” Toole said. “We got our first small stripers from hatcheries in Virginia and the Carolinas. But we’ve already learned to hand-raise the fish–to milk the female and get the eggs, then milk the male and get a deposit of sperm on the eggs to fertilize them.

“We’ve got stripers of our own big enough, around five pounds, to spawn. So we’re set.”

In a way, the story of the white bass and the story of the striped bass just about mark the beginning and the end of Toole’s long career as an aquatic biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Service.

For he was on hand when white bass were spread across Texas–the originals having been taken from Caddo Lake, on the Texas-Louisiana line. Now most lakes, big and small, in Texas are lousy with white bass. Too many of them, as proved by the puny

size of those usually caught, in sharp contrast to the whoppers, around three to five pounds, that were common when the lakes were new and white bass had just been put in them.

There is no need to raise white bass in hatcheries, since one female spawns maybe a couple of hundred thousand eggs, depending on her size, in sharp contrast to eight thousand or so eggs spawned by a female black bass.

But stripers–different story there. As Toole said, man will have to carry out their sex life for them.

And so I said to Toole, “Well, how about my tarpon and snook?”

“You’ll have to find out from somebody else,” Toole said. “You know where my work has been done–in freshwater and with freshwater fish.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll find out.”

I just *thought* I would. Evidently nobody in a position to do anything about it–no marine biologists or anybody else–has even thought of bringing these great game fish inland and planting them.

And, of course, nobody has considered milking these fish at hatcheries and getting fertile eggs and young the way biologists have been doing with rainbow trout and a few other species for years, and the way they’re now doing with striped bass.

And when I meditate on the probable reaction of a five-foot lady tarpon when some guy undertakes to milk her, I can understand why no biologist has given serious thought to such an undertaking.

Want to try milking a wildcat?

In a final comment that day, Toole told me that it now appears that the newly introduced striped bass may prove the salvation of many of our lakes which are being ruined by the gizzard shad.

The shad are more numerous that the predatory fish and grow faster. They get so big, two or three pounds, that black bass and white bass can't eat them. So they take over.

Toole thinks the stripers may bring about an adjustment in that situation in a hurry. They love gizzard shad–and a fifteen-pounder can take on any gizzard shad alive.

All very nice–except that some flaws in the current pattern of thinking about this situation are likely to be revealed eventually.

Big striped bass may prefer black bass to gizzard shad.

Then what?

Anyway, I took off on my search, and it can rightly be called a search instead of research. I wanted to find somebody who knew enough about tarpon and snook to at least discuss the possibility of planting these fish inland.

I didn't find anybody.

So I speculate and draw dream pictures that some biologist may fill out later if tarpon are on the way out as a result of the manner in which man has managed and mismanaged his environment. And I don't pour it on anybody–not even Modern Man specifically. After all, man began wrecking the environment when he learned to cultivate crops, eight thousand or more years ago.

We're just speeding up the process of wrecking.

But we *know* what we are doing. Maybe we can "turn back" in some ways?

I figure we may not do so in time to save tarpon, since all those marine hatchery experiments along our coasts are concerned with eating fish–redfish, speckled trout, flounder, even shrimp–and not tarpon.

So let's take a look.

Right off the bat I suggest that somebody get busy and put hundreds of thousands of baby tarpon and snook in the big lakes in the far southern part of Texas, where chances of the fish surviving during winter will be best.

Getting the tiny fish wouldn't be much of a job. Just nose around the coastal area of the southern part of Mexico for a month or so and find the hideouts of the babies, then catch them in nets, put them in tanks, and fly them to Texas.

And, in the process, fly plenty of them to big lakes in Mexico, if the MExican government wants that.

The cost would be trivial compared to what we spend in raising catfish and bass in hatcheries. And there is absolutely no doubt about tarpon and snook thriving in such fresh waters, at least for a time, for both species–maybe some stay there. Nobody knows.

In Texas the stocking program might well be started at Falcon Lake, southeast of Laredo on the Rio Grande. That's warm country.

Sure, the snook–and probably tarpon also–in my *resaca* died when the temperature dropped to around twenty and stayed there three days. But my *resaca* is only

twelve feet at its deepest spot, whereas Falcon Lake is more than two hundred feet deep near the dam.

There's a big difference. No cold wave is going to lower the temperature of that water enough to hurst tarpon or snook.

The still larger, and brand new Amistad Lake, farther up the Rio Grande (near the town of Del Rio) would be another fine spot for some planting. The program might include stocking these fish in lakes still farther north in Texas–Lake Corpus Christi, the Hill Country lakes near Austin, the lakes from Houston on north for two hundred miles or so.

And the argument I used to get–that tarpon might kill out the bass–is no longer tenable in view of those striped bass being stocked in Texas lakes.

And what the hell? Suppose tarpon did kill out a lot of bass? It's a simple job to replace them from hatcheries, and hanging a five-foot tarpon in, let's say, Lake Travis, near Austin, would be an event in a fisherman's life that no bass take of any kind could ever match.

There are at least twenty-five large lakes and about a hundred smaller ones in Texas that are deep enough to offer a chance for survival of tarpon, especially since it seldom stays cold more than three or four days anywhere in Texas except the extreme western part and the Panhandle.

As for the Panhandle–"Gee, I'll bet it's cold at Amarillo," the man said as he stood at the North Pole.

Would the fish reproduce?

Probably not–at least I doubt very much if tarpon would, for it seems obvious that those dopey larval forms must fiddle around in offshore Gulf or Atlantic Ocean waters for a spell before moving to shore and becoming true fish and carrying on.

Snook might. I've heard dozens of reports about landing snook in various lakes in Mexico and Central America. Tex Purvis, who has operated a guide service in Mexico, says tarpon remain the year around in a landlocked lake up the Usamacinta River, which is at the border of Mexico and Guatemala.

I've fished near the river, which empties into the Gulf of Campeche just west of Carmen. But I've never been up it–and I've never heard of any landlocked lake up the river.

The same goes for Lake Nicaragua. Tarpon are so numerous there that native fishermen working in the river below the lake always keep a paddle handy to defend themselves against leaping tarpon.

But Lake Nicaragua is *not* landlocked–and I don't think any lake up the Usamacinta River is landlocked.

People *think* they are. But contact between lake and saltwater is always made during periods of heavy rain.

In fact, I think snook crossed the narrow land barrier between oceans by storming out of such lakes in both directions during periods of tremendous rainfall. They had to make contact some way, and if you have a better theory, haul it out and defend it.

Well, what do we do if they won't reproduce in our lakes?

It's simplifying the situation to say that we will continue seining small snook and tarpon out of waters south of the Rio Grande and flying the fish to our lakes. For we are ignoring the possibility that there may not be any small tarpon down there to catch.

So how about raising tarpon in hatcheries, as I mentioned? It might work–it might not. That mighty female, and her male boyfriend, could conceivably be quieted down with a shot of the stuff they use to put big game animals to sleep temporarily. Then they could be handled.

Or could we build on the coast a hatchery where the tarpon could be confined and might do their own mating without help?

Nobody knows. Nobody seems to care.

Latest information I have is that the saltwater hatcheries don't seem to be doing much good in restocking the bays with redfish and speckled trout, although the work is being continued.

Also more and more redfish are being stocked in lakes in west Texas, where there is considerable salinity in the water. Reds are caught there now and then, but there is no evidence of reproduction.

But tarpon and particularly snook are different–they go up rivers, redfish and weakfish and flounder don't. It might turn out to be easier to arrange an environment in which tarpon and snook will reproduce–and in which the young, even those larval tarpon, can be nursed along until they're big enough to be planted in a lake.

That's going to be an interesting biological experiment, if it is ever made–that larval tarpon. What does he feed on? Can his natural food be duplicated? And is there any reason why we don't find out.

Snook should be an easy species to deal with, for they reach maturity around six pounds–about the same as striped bass–and can even be milked even if they don't like it.

And real fish, not larvae, hatch out of the eggs.

If we don't make a genuine effort to bring these two great game fish, one of which is finer eating that any freshwater fish, inland, then we are passing up a really great opportunity.

There is no way of knowing just how far north tarpon and snook might survive, if the water is deep. And if it's too cold, heat the doggone stuff.

Plenty of water in lakes, mostly man-made, near every industrial plant is heated. Tarpon and snook might very well make it through the winter huddling around the hot water coming out of such plants.

Bass lead a lazy, luxurious life in Lake Calavaras, which is heated by water coming out of the power plant that supplies San Antonio and surrounding area.

Why wouldn't tarpon love it there? And at similar plants scattered all over the country?

We just haven't bothered to consider such a possibility. We spend millions of dollars restocking lakes with catfish–which you can have. But we won't even spend a hundred thousand to lug some baby tarpon and snook from Mexico to Texas and see how they do in our lakes.

It’s time somebody did something.

I’ll move on now to that final chapter–a discussion of what we might do to help the tarpon in his natural environment.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHERE DO WE GO NOW?

And so we come to the Big Question: Should the title of this book be, *Decline and Fall of the Silver King*?

Or is there a chance we might check the decline–maybe even give the tarpon a nudge upward?

What man hath wrought, man may not be able to "unwrought." And if you can't find that word "unwrought" in your dictionary, put it there. It's a good word.

But man can try.

And if you bear in mind that any good things we do for those estuarine creatures that are of commercial value–redfish, flounder, speckled trout, croakers, shrimp and so on–are almost certain to bring an equal benefit to tarpon, then you might start hoping.

The first thing we *must* do is to admit that tarpon fishing is shot to hell–that tarpon in the Gulf of Mexico all the way down to Vera Cruz are coming upon hard times.

Before you can cure an illness, you must admit it and diagnose it.

We refuse to do that about our coastal fishing because doing so may be bad for the tourist business.

Just to prove the point I wrote several chambers of commerce along the Texas coast asking about tarpon fishing. One or two ignored my letter–they smelled something,

because they remembered outdoor columns of mine in Texas newspapers that told about the decline of the tarpon.

But from Port Isabel, my old stomping (not stamping) ground, I got a cheery letter saying tarpon fishing was fine and come on down.

How fine?

I've mentioned that in the 1971 annual fishing roundup (once called tarpon rodeo) at Port Isabel, one eighteen-inch tarpon was caught.

Tarpon fishing is fine?

But the speckled trout situation is obviously not much better. Remember that 2 1/2 pound speck that won top prize in the same fishing rodeo? The big trout of earlier days would have swallowed him.

It's the same way all along the Texas coast.

In three years only two small tarpon were caught in the Freeport fishing rodeo–which was also a tarpon rodeo in earlier days. And those small fish were caught by anglers trolling for Spanish mackerel. Nobody really fished for tarpon.

Tarpon are practically gone from the New Brazos. I've told about the Rio Grande. I did a lot of checking all along the coast, but I had to go to newspaper outdoor writers to get the truth, and I promised that I would not identify them.

They must write only "constructive" stuff about fishing. Instead of saying that anglers catch a wad of baby trout–a half a pound each–at times, these writers use the term "school trout." Any time you see that, you can be certain the trout are in the nine- to twelve-inch range–half a pound or less.

It's more fun dipping goldfish out of a bowl.

Not only is the term "school trout" a euphemism, as used here, it is really inaccurate. For practically all speckled trout are "school fish," except during the spawning season. And quite obviously they get back together, in schools, after spawning, as demonstrated by the great schools of five- to ten-pound trout we once encountered in the Eighth Pass in Mexico.

But when you read in Texas newspapers about school trout, you can know they are babies.

A snook is a rarity on the Texas coast. Now and then anglers will get into a school of fair-sized redfish, but mostly they catch what we used to call rat reds–two pounds or so.

Okay, tarpon have almost disappeared from the Texas coast. How about Mexico?

I haven't been there in a long time, so I called Dave Young at Brownsville.

"I went to the Panuco," he said. "Couldn't believe it–no tarpon. Not even any mullet. People told me that a huge cotton acreage has developed up the river and that the stuff is being saturated with pesticides."

"You hear anything about Carmen?" I asked.

"Now and then I see somebody's that been there," Dave said. "But if I ask about tarpon, they seem surprised."

"Progress," as we understand that term, is moving south, bringing untold "blessings" to those so-called underdeveloped countries.

And when Mexicans get heptachlor and dieldrin and endrin, they're just as wild with the stuff as they were with airplanes when they first started work as commercial airline pilots. I know–I flew with them. It was a game to them.

How about Florida? And the West Indies? And Guatemala?

I don't *need* to find out. As that editor once told a writer who complained that his whole story was not read, "It is not necessary to eat all of an egg to find out if it is rotten."

You look at what's happened on the Texas coast and you *know* what's happened or is beginning to happen throughout the entire range of tarpon.

I know it may sound absurd to speculate on extinction on the tarpon, since one female lays twelve million eggs and you can find tarpon by the thousands at many spots–probably including Carmen.

But there is a vast difference in the critical number that signals an endangered species. I may be several million tarpon but only a few thousand whitetail deer.

Bear in mind that the passenger pigeon was not killed out by man with a gun. He vanished almost overnight when destruction of his nesting areas and roosts suddenly reduced his numbers to, let's say, a mere million or so.

Crowding means different things to different species.

The coyote continues increasing, both in range and numbers, in spite of trapping and poisoning. But the plains wolf vanished from Texas. Man "crowded" him–the coyote doesn't mind being crowded. In a way, he likes it. If he is deprived of rabbits and rats and man's sheep, he eats man's watermelons and cucumbers and cantaloupes.

He is adaptable. The wolf was not.

And the tarpon is not.

So it is conceivable that he could vanish at least fro vast areas of the Gulf coast, almost overnight. He might reach a point where young, including those dopey larvae, can't stand up under the pressure of normal predators–and bingo! He's gone.

I say this is possible. I'm not predicting it–I choose to hope, even though doing so may be indulging in dreams.

But I do know that before we can do anything to save him, assuming that we want to, we *must* admit the sorry state of tarpon today.

And that of other estuarine creatures.

Then as my No. 2 suggestion, I recommend that somebody get busy and find out about the life cycle of the tarpon.

And nobody really knows. I'm not expressing my opinion alone–I quote from "on high."

I have a letter from A.N. Woodall, assistant chief of the Division of Fishery Research of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, about this.

Woodall's letter starts:

"Since receiving your interesting letter about the tarpon, I have been searching for an 'expert' to help answer your questions. I've come to the conclusion that tarpon experts are as scarce as tarpon."

So there you have your "official" verification of my statement.

My No. 3 suggestion is that all pesticides of the chlorinated hydrocarbon group–the everlasting killers–be banished from the land.

My No. 4 suggestion is that all other forms of pollution in our rivers be stopped–and stopped now.

My No. 5 suggestion is that the industrial plants that kill all plankton in water used to cool the plants be forced to put the plankton back–or run a plankton-bearing channel around the plant.

It's stupid to brag about releasing chemically pure water from an industrial plant if the water is biologically dead.

My No. 6 suggestion is that all commercial fishing and shrimping in all our shore waters–and for five miles out to sea–be banned entirely.

Sure redfish and speckled trout are fine eating.

But did you ever consider this: The total catch of these fish for a year would not feed the people of Houston for one day.

Yet we stand by and watch a fine sports fishery destroyed because the people on the coast will not admit the truth–bad publicity–and because most of the state representatives from the coastal area are on retainers by the fish and shrimp operators.

They block all attempts at conservation. I'm quite familiar with that story, for I've appeared several times before legislative committees considering conservation bills–and each time I knew that a majority of the members were on retainers from the fish and shrimp operators.

So the fishing goes to hell.

And the outdoor writer must talk about "school trout," instead of about baby trout. And he does not say that there are not enough tarpon to justify a trip because he instructed not to say that.

I'm not going way out of the way to pour it on anybody. It just happens that several outdoor writers for papers in coastal cities have told me what the situation is...and they can't tell it in print.

They'd like to pour it on. They aren't permitted to do so.

Suggestion No. 7 is this: Force those who control the flow of our rivers to permit a small but steady flow into saltwater where there was such a flow before man started building dams.

It's actually criminal to kill the Rio Grande–to cut flow entirely and watch a bar form across the mouth of the stream.

It's tragic that water near the mouth of the Brazos moves back and forth with the tide–no flow.

That's just the beginning.

Unless there is a change, the mighty Mississippi may stop flowing to the sea.

You think I'm kidding? Go look at plans for "Water development and multi-use," as it is called, for the Mississippi. There is even a plan to take water out of it and run the stuff by canal all the way across Texas to the Rio Grande.

Man *can* stop the flow of the mighty river into the Gulf. And history tells us that what man can do, he is very likely to do. THE BOMB, for example.

There are many other things that should be done. For example, checking the conversion of bay shores into housing projects.

As Dr. Carl Hubbs, professor of zoology at the University of Texas told me. “In building marinas on bays, we may be defeating the purposes of them,” he said.

That is, we build marinas so fishermen can relax in comfort on the water and storm out in a hurry in a fast boat and get into the action–tarpon, trout, reds.

And they usually return with limp spirits and maybe a batch of baby trout and hardhead catfish–turd rustlers, as we who know fishing call them. The turd rustler loves to be “crowded” by man. He swarms under the overwater toilets and gorges on human feces.

But tarpon and trout and redfish? Maybe such crowding doesn’t kill them–it merely drives them away, and they find a home in some other bay. Then man follows them to *that* bay and starts building more marinas...

When will we run out of bays? An interesting question.

I wind up this dissertation with a prediction that the silver king will survive, at least in a considerable part of his vast range. I *know* he will survive if enough people learn the truth and start acting on the basis of what they learn.

So I conclude by repeating the opening comment in this book: Dedicated to the proposition that the tarpon shall not vanish from the seas.

May the “Glory of the Silver King” shine on.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Captain Brandon D. Shuler of 1307 B Kiwi, Pharr, Texas 78577 is a 1996 graduate of the College of Charleston School of Education with a Bachelors of Science in Exercise Physiology. He is a past United States Olympic National Teams coach for USA Triathlon, where he co-authored the first USAT Coaches Manual.

Captain Shuler is a contributing editor to *Saltwater Sportsman*, *Field & Stream*, *Outdoor Life*, and other outdoor publications. He is also a frequent contributor to *E: The Environmental Magazine*, *Texas Books in Review*, and the *American Book Review*. His fiction can be found in *Far & Away Journal* and *Gray's Sporting Journal*.

While not publishing book reviews and outdoor essays, Captain Shuler is busy editing Hart Stilwell's *Glory of the Silver King*, whose rights have been purchased by Texas A&M University Press. Captain Shuler is also finishing a novel about the history of a fishing family living on the Laguna Madre, and he is working on a text book to teach future environmental activists how to get involved and engaged with local and national environmental grassroots campaigns.

When Mr. Shuler is not busy editing and publishing, he is a grassroots advocacy consultant for the Ocean Conservancy and the PEW Environmental Trusts.