

Bill Rea ? My fish story



We're at the time of year when people are thinking about vacation, and I'm in that group.

A holiday away from home is something we all look forward to and that is certainly the case with me. Indeed, it has always been that way, ever since I was a kid.

We all enjoy a change in the routine, and little kids, when they don't have to get up every morning to go to school, find there is a tendency to get a little bored.

Few school kids will admit such things at the time, but as they reflect back, I think most will agree that summer tended to drag a bit, and while they may not have been anxious to get back to class, they would be willing to have something to break up the monotony.

In a way, I was lucky as a kid. My father used to wait until the last two weeks of summer vacation before taking his time off, so there was always something to look forward to throughout the break from school.

My family used to go fishing. My dad loved it, I think my mother tolerated it, my brother Michael pretended to hate it, but I don't think that was the case, and I enjoyed just about all of it, with the possible exception of waiting for things to happen. Patience has never been one of my strong points, but it is a requirement if one is going to go fishing.

But in some ways, I was known as the fisherman of the family.

There was a time when I had only one grandparent still alive. It was my paternal grandmother, and she died when I was 17, having been a widow for 16 years. As we were cleaning out her house after her death, I found there were five pictures on the table next to her bed. They were of her five grandchildren. Four of the pictures were either grad photos or had obviously been taken in a studio. The other was of the eight-year-old boy who was myself, standing on a dock on the shore of Lake Nipissing, holding a six-and-a-half (not six, mind you, but six-and-a-half) pound northern pike that he had caught. If memory serves, Michael, who would have been 12 at the time, was standing in the background, scratching his head with a puzzled look on his face, as if wondering how his bratty kid brother had gotten so lucky. I think he was peeved.

My grandmother died in that bed, and if she had happened to look at those pictures in her final moments, her last thoughts of me in this world would have been connected with that big fish. I really don't mind.

For many years, my family spent the last two weeks of summer vacation at a fishing camp on Lake Nipissing, in Callander Bay at the east end of the lake. My dad liked it because it was relatively sheltered from strong winds, meaning he could get out and fish just about whenever he wanted to (he was not a man who let a little rain get in the way of his fun, or a lot of rain for that matter).

It was also a tradition that the entire family spent at least one whole day during that fortnight out in the boat fishing, whether the kids liked it or not.

That annual day in 1966 saw each of the four of us catch a fish; all pike. I got the biggest and Michael got the smallest (another reason why I think he was peeved).

The big moment of the day came at a rather inopportune time. Three of the family members had their lines out of the water, either cleaning weed from the hooks or changing lures. I was the only one with my line in the drink, so Dad used the time to turn the boat around.

The change in direction became complicated because my line became wrapped around my old man's neck, and he was less than pleased with that. My dad dealt with the issue involving his offspring with his usual diplomacy, ala "Get your @\$%&*\$#@#& line out of my @\$%&*\$#@#& neck!!!" Had I been 10 years older, he probably would have used much stronger language.

At this point, none of us in the boat realized it was a @\$%&*\$#@#& six-and-a-half pound pike that was setting the agenda, but we all got the message pretty quickly.

It wasn't an easy fish to land because the hook wasn't set very well. At one point, the captain of the boat grabbed my fishing rod and took over the operation (my late father was a man who was inclined to take charge in certain circumstances, especially when he wanted to), but later realized he was stomping a bit on fisherman's etiquette. Since I was the one who hooked the fish, it was mine to land. I think he was more excited than I was.

My grandmother spent the last couple of years of her life sleeping next to proof that the fish was eventually landed successfully. There were other fish stories in the years that followed, but the one I just related was the best.

The last time I went fishing was with my father, and that was in the fall of 1990, once again on Lake Nipissing. He died two years later. I haven't fished since, and I'm not likely to ever do it again. Over the years, I have developed a problem with the idea of making sport out of forcing fellow creatures to fight for their lives. It's something I don't think my conscience will let me shrug off. But with all due respect to the memory of those fish who fell to my dubious angling skills, the memories are good ones.