The birthday

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By JOHN L. SLOAN

Many years ago in Wyoming, I spent my birthday fishing on the Powder River in the land of Butch and Sundance. I remember it as being a great birthday. That memory spawned this story. JLS

It had been a pleasant night. He had actually slept well, something he did not often do anymore. Usually he would be up every 90 minutes for one reason or another. Last night he had only gotten up once. Maybe he should try sleeping in a tent and on a foam pad at home.

The woods had been noisy last night. A variety of animals, especially the peepers, had carried on a conversation the whole time. Maybe that white noise had allowed him to sleep so well. It was slowly coming daylight now. He could feel it seeping in. He stretched making both his back and his hip pop. He shook his left arm and got the feeling going in it. Eventually he would have to have something done about the pinched nerve.

Using a small light he reached out and got the electric start, Coleman stove going under the coffee pot and his water for oatmeal heating, grinning as he always did at the wonders of modern technology. Then he relaxed again. It came to him slowly. It was June 30. He was 67 today. He couldn't think of a better way to spend a birthday.

Fishing.

He liked to fish in his small boat. It was just the right size for the lake. Large enough and stable enough he felt comfortable in it yet light enough he could load it in the truck by himself. His trolling motor moved it well and the battery would stay hot for two days.

His coffee started to perk.

The owls began. This place was known for the owls. They were everywhere and they were vocal. When they fired off, the coyotes answered and a turkey got excited. He just grinned and listened to his coffee start to burp. The smell was filling the tent.

It was a good tent, a veteran of many excursions from the Rocky Mountains to the swamps of Louisiana and had served him well in all places. It was big enough to be comfortable and move around in, yet easy to setup, tight and dry in the toughest weather. He had spent many nights in the tent.

He got up and slipped his feet into his hard-sole moccasins then stepped outside to attend to business and sniff the almost morning air. It was cool but he knew it would be hot when the sun came up. After all, it was June. He figured the pool at the Floyd would be crowded today. There would be no crowd here, never was. He poured his coffee with a liberal dose of sugar and cream and began to stir the boiling water into his oatmeal. He sat in the folding chair and began to plan his day, not that there was a lot of planning involved. The day would unfold however it would unfold.

The sun was still hiding behind the ridge tops and the lake lay wreathed in fog along the steep bank as he slid the boat into the lake and started the trolling motor. His rods were laid out neatly across the back and the cooler was within easy reach. He would keep two or three small bass for his lunch. Supper would be a nice piece of deer backstrap marinating in a Ziploc bag. He had a big Vidalia and a couple homegrowns from Carrol Whitener's garden.

He started on the deep bank where a shelf came out. The small Zara Spook lay motionless in the water. He began to swim it in the erratic manner that made it so irresistible to bass. After 10 feet he stopped.

The water exploded and he set the hook. Using only eight pound test line required some finesse when it came to fighting anything over three pounds. The bass began to tire and he leaned forward and skillfully lipped it. First fish of the day. Good start to a birthday.

He was still in the shade as he worked his way down the bank. The woods on top the ridge were coming to life. Birds were flitting around; a beaver threw a wake as she hurried home with a fresh limb. The turtles were starting to find their sunning spots on the logs. He shed his shirt and moved on. He was catching bass with regularity.

When he made the turn at the end of the lake, he changed rods and picked up the one with a Gitzit tied on. It was on a quarter ounce jig and he would bounce it slowly on the bottom. With the third cast, for some reason he began to doubt his choice of lure. Then it stopped. No tap or bump. It just stopped. He set the hook hard and rod bowed deeply toward the water. It was game on.

He had always thought there were some big fish in the lake. It just did not get enough pressure to hurt the population or age bracket. However, he had not expected this. The fish jumped, shaking its' head, massive maw wide open. He could have stuck both fists in the mouth. Finally, he slid his hand under the fish's belly and lifted her in the boat. He guessed at close to nine pounds. Maybe 10. A great birthday present, he thought as he gently released her.

The sun was more than warm now. It was coming on to morning naptime. Three fish to fillet and then an hour of downtime before lunch. The foam pad was calling and his eyes had suddenly gotten heavy. With the fillets on ice, he kicked off his shoes and stretched out on top the sleeping bag. In less than a blink, he was asleep.

Of course, being late June, it was hot. In the tent, it was stifling hot so he spent the hottest part of the day with a lawn chair in the ice-cold spring that fed the lake. It was as though he was sitting in air conditioning. He read for a while, an old book by Falkner. He topped that off with a cold shower and a clean shirt. He had the wood gathered for his supper fire and the deer meat was marinating nicely. He put a couple bottles of water and one of cream soda in his cooler. Then he went fishing.

The fish were cooperating though not as well as they had in the morning. He picked up one here and there and just at sundown he switched to a white floating worm and targeted the open pockets back in the moss.

The shock down his arm was electric. The hook was set and the fish bored under the moss. He put all the pressure he felt 10-pound test could stand on the fish and slowly, as the sun sank below the ridge, he felt the fish begin to come toward him.

It had been a great birthday, one of the best in 67 years.

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