

The dawn patrol

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We got our shad below the dam with a cast net. About 15, was all we could keep alive and we carried them up the hill in 5-gallon buckets

That is comparable to running three marathons back to back. We were young and strong then. The ideal shad was about five inches long and we hooked them through the lips. The rig was a ½-ounce egg sinker above a swivel. The shad was on 18-inches of line below that.

We would be on the water at least an hour before dawn. However, the action usually started just as the sun topped the trees. Our favorite starting point was outside the roadbed at Hamilton Creek. A rock pile there holds shad. This was especially true with an East wind.

Our number two-spot was behind Bird Island in Old Hickory Cove. Often, the wind blew the shad into the cove from the main lake. J. Percy Priest was the top spot for rockfish and to some degree still is. Best conditions were some wind and cloud cover, maybe even some rain and right in the heat of summer.

The live shad were stool pigeons. When fish got close, they got nervous. That spawned the term "shadgraph". The late Mickey Pope coined that term. It soon spread throughout the rockfish fraternity working out of Elm Hill. Stu Tinney, Tony Bean and I fished six or seven days a week. For some strange reason, back then, I liked catching the darn things.

That is no longer true. I believe aching wrists and shoulders have something to do with it.

Now and then, we would use artificial lures. The big surface lures like the Redfin were the best but you could not count out a white, ¼-ounce doll fly with white pork rind for a trailer. I wish we'd had flukes back then.

We were in Mickey's boat that morning and he was on the trolling motor and working a shad about 30-feet deep. The first planes were just starting to leave BNA and pass over our heads and the sun was just rimming the trees. "Shadgraph.", said Pope, standing up and lowering his rod.

"Something is getting close. My own shad was calm so I had my doubts. Then, I saw his rod tip start a downward arc and Pope set his feet.

Then, when the rod tip went under the water to the first guide, he set the hook and the fight was on.

As I recall, that fish was in the 30-pound range. We caught a lot of 30-pounders during those times and an occasional one bumping 40. The largest I ever caught came out of Old Hickory at the steam plant. It was just a pound shy of 50, according to the scales we had. They may or may not have been accurate. I do know it was the biggest I ever caught.

For sheer numbers, Priest was the place. I recall catching as many as 10 in one morning. Then, when they stocked the damn hybrids, you could catch one of those every cast, once you got into them. That is when I lost interest anything with stripes, including zebras and referees.

Through the years, Mickey and I caught a lot of rockfish in a variety of places. For a while, the lower reaches of the Caney Fork became one of our favorite haunts. The big fish were hard to land due to the current and the plentitude of snags for them to wrap lines around. Near the highway 70 bridge over the Caney, a place they call Falling Water Rocks, Mickey tied into what may have been the biggest rockfish I ever saw. I would hate to guess at the weight.

It did not take the fish long to break off but that was a big fish and then some. Below Cheatham dam was another place the shadgraph worked. We caught tons of rockfish there on hot afternoons. It is dangerous and a life jacket is mandatory. If you fall in, odds are, you won't get out.

If you have nothing to do some hot night, see if you can't net some shad and keep them alive long enough to get to the lake. It is best if you go with someone and for sure wear your life jacket.

Start in front of the boat ramp at Hamilton Creek and work around both sides. Keep your boat in 30-40 feet of water and keep your ears open for fish in the jumps. When it gets light, look for the birds zeroed in on schools of baitfish. Pay attention to your shadgraph and get ready for the dawn patrol.

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