

They call it 'The Smith'

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It winds down the draws and hollers and through the fields for 99 miles. One more mile and it would be a river, so they tell me. I have no idea if that is true. I do know it is full of fish and some big smallmouth. It is floated, camped on, waded and at one time, so they tell me, it was famous for spearing suckers. Before that, the Indians used it as a highway. I have no idea if that is true.

The Smith Fork.

Arguably, one of Tennessee's best smallmouth streams and not a lot of anglers ever heard of it, let alone know where it is. It empties into the Caney Fork. Exactly where it starts, I have no idea but it runs through or around Smithville. I have only fished it from the old mill down to the Caney. Of course, you know where the old mill was?

Although I should not, I might suggest that if you live around here and have access to a good map, you might look it up. Just outside Temperance Hall is a good place to find it. Then, trace it to the Caney.

Remember, that is private land. You need permission to cross any of it. You cross over it when you take a Sunday drive from Gordonsville, through Lancaster over to Center Hill Dam. Doesn't look like much from the bridge.

I have introduced the Smith to many folks over the years. It started back in 1978, with Harold Dotson and Chuck Wilson. We were sitting on the porch at the camp on Center Hill, enjoying the afternoon sun and something over ice. Buddy Mason, stopped by and mentioned it. A few minutes later, he showed us where to put in and where to take out.

Back then, I had a heavy, 14-foot, aluminum jon-boat. We were young and strong then so heavy

did not matter. It was quite a float. I have no idea how many fish we caught but it was several and that is just an estimate. The amazing thing was the size of the smallmouth bass. I am talking over five pounds and more than one or two. Could perhaps maybe so be the biggest smallmouth I ever caught came from the Smith? No scales so we had to estimate. I may have caught one larger on Dale Hollow, not sure.

The last time I floated, it was with The Big Bird two years ago. I needed some pictures for a photo array I did on shore lunch for a women's magazine we so floated, fished and cooked.

I have been down that creek a hundred times with the late Mickey Pope. I have fished it with Russ Jackson, Donny Winfree, Jackie Taylor, The Right Honorable Judge Dave Durham and many others. I have gone through that old aluminum boat, two poly-something boats and a damnable craft made of pure, unadulterated crap. That boat, or the remnants thereof, remain somewhere along the banks.

I'll recount a few trips:

Cold, below freezing and sunny. I know this because the two inches of water, in the bottom of the aluminum boat from the day before, are solid ice. We dump that out, the Pope and I and launch. Before I can get right with the current, Pope had a three-pounder on. Minutes later, on two straight casts, I put 10-pounds of smallmouth in the boat. It went that way for four hours. I estimate we had six fish over five pounds. They wanted the floating Rapala.

Beautiful spring day. Russell and Donnie help me launch. I am sitting on a five-gallon bucket, bungeed to the front seat. That allowed me to see the upcoming rocks and steer around them. We swirl into a bend at the wrong angle, headed straight for a huge tree. I put out a foot to avoid the wreck. The impact knocked me off the bucket and I fall striking my head on the aluminum, middle seat. Out cold but come to, quickly and resume the trip...of which, I have no memory. Big dent in the seat from that day on.

Hot, wading with Russell and we get into the spots. No stringer so we start putting one-pound, spotted bass in our pockets. We keep fishing, screaming and jumping every now and then. Ever had a live, wiggling bass in your front pocket, right next to your personals? That is some memory.

Cool in the early spring morning, too cold to wade naturally. The Pope is wearing hip boots and casting a riffle. The poly-something boat beached on the gravel bar. Cast after cast, fish after fish. I watched him catch nine straight smallmouth from 1-4 pounds before he missed one. He was fishing a black, 1/8-ounce buzzbait and just as it swung into the current, they nailed it. He would catch one, put it in the boat and cast again. I will not forget that...or him.

The Wilson, several years before the wreck that took his life, still young and slim. We launch the old aluminum boat and slide down the glassy drifts, fish here, fish there just regular action. Then, WHAM! Something hammers his floating Rapala. Big smallmouth and a split second later, I have one on maybe two pounds bigger. We estimate mine at close to seven pounds. We stop under the power line crossing and I take his picture, standing in the boat with both fish then we release them.

I'm running the boat; Judge Durham and son Clint are fishing back and middle. We are catching fish and it is just spring enough to start greening up. This was before I got sick and lost so much strength and weight. I sail the little jerkbait into a slow, deep hole and bang. A standard Smith smallmouth attaches.

The key to floating the Smith is boat control. You have to know what you are doing to position the boat in a way that will allow you to make a cast that fits the current. It would take an entire column to explain that to someone that does not have a lot of experience running a boat in current. The boat must glide on the edges of the current. It is somewhat of an art, not one easily learned.

For lures I would have floating Rapalas, a ShadRap or two, for sure, some in-line spinners, couple small buzzbaits, medium size jerkbait and probably a small, white spinner bait with gold blades. Just put together a standard creek box and you will be okay.

We fished the Smith any time of year and caught fish for close to 25-years. Then, something happened on the stretch I like to fish. Don't know what it was, pressure, toxins, don't know. But it was not the way it once was last time I fished it.

Oh, we caught fish, Big Bird and I. For sure, we had enough for a shore lunch. But it was not the way it once was.

Just might have to try it again one day this summer. It is a simple creek to fish. Simple lures, simple tactics. Simple kind of creek.

Take a drive some afternoon and find it. Then, go fish it. You might be surprised.

They simply call it the Smith.

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