

## 30: The Crappie Hole

### From My Memoir *Memory of Amnesia*

The dedication in my father's *Textbook of Limnology* says, "To those closest to me..." and then he wrote our names. He added "...and to Samuel Eddy, who helped me get my feet wet."

I never knew Sam Eddy, but I understand that he was a biologist well known for his teaching and scientific research. Another thing he is known for is his discovery of the crappie hole in Minnesota's Lake Itasca. They say that Samuel Eddy quite often went fishing in the lake and that he always came back with black crappies and no one but he knew how to catch any of them there.

They also say that everyone used to follow Sam Eddy around because they wanted to know where the crappies were, but nobody ever managed to catch him and he never revealed their whereabouts. The "Sam Eddy Crappie Hole" became a thing of legend.

In the sixties, my family and I always spent summers on the shores of the lake because my father taught classes at the biology station there.

One day, my younger brother was fishing with our friend Bill Underhill when they began to catch dozens of black crappies. They had discovered the famous "Sam Eddy Crappie Hole."

The crappies were huge. My brother even entered the biggest in a fishing contest. He may have won a prize, but I don't remember.

At any rate, we fished there quite a lot and we almost always caught plenty of black crappies, and often enough we caught them one after the other.

Black crappies like to fight near the surface. You could see the silvery fish shining in the sun as it fought a foot below the surface of the lake.

Crappies have more or less the shape of a bluegill, but they're a little bigger and are the color of a sheet of galvanized steel. They eat minnows and so the best lure to catch them with is a jig fly, which consists of nothing more than a hook with a lead head and some feathers. You can also use a similar lure called a "beetle"

because it's made in the shape of a larval beetle. People say that to black crappies these lures look like minnows.

The two lures "dance" in the water because the metal eye where the line is tied is situated on the top of the lead head. When you lift the rod tip, the lure hops up and down.

There's another kind of fish that likes these lures. Its Latin name is *Sander vitreus* and its common name in Spanish is *Lucioperca americana* that also seems to me to be Latin. I have read that in some areas of the US and Canada these fish are called "pike perch," almost a literal translation of "lucioperca." We always called them "walleyed pike" although we knew that they weren't real "pike" (*Esox lucius*) being from the perch family.

I caught my first in the Missouri River near Lake Oahe in South Dakota in 1965. A man gave me a lure called a "Canadian Jig Fly" and it was the first time that I had caught a fish using a lure. I still have the lure and the jaws of the fish.



The "Canadian Jig Fly" and the fish's jaws

My friend Bill Underhill caught a big walleye in the crappie hole with his lure the "Super Beetle."



Our Gang

What attracts the crappies to that area? We snorkeled and found on the bottom of the lake a large box woven of wooden boards. Someone told us that the box on the bottom of the crappie hole was the foundation of a diving tower that had been constructed there one-hundred years ago. Crappies like submerged structures and tend to congregate in such places.

While diving there, we found a lot of lures stuck to the boards that other fishermen had lost. We found anchors as well.



Anchors and junk that we recovered from the "Sam Eddy Crappie Hole" in 1965

We quite often lost our own lures. One day, my younger brother lost his favorite lure when it got stuck on a submerged board and the line broke.

Two weeks went by and one day while I was snorkeling I saw the lure stuck to a board some twelve feet down. I pulled it off of the board and returned it to my brother. We still have that lure as well as the “Super Beetle” that our friend Bill Underhill gave me.



From left to right: my brother's lure that I recovered and Bill Underhill's "Super Beetle."

I go back to Minnesota from time to time and I always try to catch some crappies in the same place, but I haven't had any luck. It seems that the fish have abandoned the site or perhaps I've forgotten where the crappie hole is.



Photo that Bill gave me

I'd like to go fishing once again with my friend Bill, but he disappeared. He was last seen at a party on the University of Minnesota campus in March of 1969. More than forty years have gone by and no one has seen or heard from him since.

## A Bit of Mischief

### From My Memoir *Memory of Amnesia*

Every now and then something happens that shows a surprising link between someone's ordinary life and the most important events of history. I must have been fifteen years old when one night some friends and I decided to go to the headwaters of the Mississippi River.

In the summers, we lived on the shores of Lake Itasca, the headwaters of the Mississippi. Lake Itasca is located in the state of Minnesota. Our dads were professors of

biology that taught class there for the University of Minnesota and since we spent our summers there, we considered the entire area ours. The tourists were just guests that we tolerated.

We walked through the forest and shortly arrived at the river that flowed slowly from the lake. Since it was late, all of the tourists had gone and the river was ours. It was twenty feet wide at most.

At the edge of the Mississippi and Lake Itasca was a post, a tree trunk that served as a sign. It had become fairly famous, and all the tourists used to come to pose for pictures there. It said, "Here 1475 feet above the ocean the mighty Mississippi begins to flow on its winding way 2552 miles to the Gulf of Mexico."



Me at the headwaters of the Mississippi in 2009

On this occasion someone had the bright idea of knocking over the trunk. There were six of us, boys and girls (I think Bill's sister Sarah was with us.) and we began to lean against the trunk. The trunk leaned a little forward.

"Stop!" I said. "It's so heavy it could squish one of us flat. Scary!"

My friend Bill pushed the trunk, which moved a little once again and he said, "You're right. It could squash you like a bug."

We all began to push carefully and suddenly Bill yelled, "Get back!"

The trunk fell over with a thud, and we all broke and ran for home.



## Lake Itasca



Me at age fourteen near Lake Itasca

In the morning, while we were having breakfast, my father looked at the paper and said, “Looks like there was some dirty work in Mississippi.”

I was surprised and a little frightened too. It seemed impossible that what we had done the night before was already in the paper. But how could my dad have read about it if it weren’t true? It was incredible.

But it wasn’t true. What we had done wasn’t important; workers uprooted the knocked-down post with no trouble.

My father was referring to the terrible murders of the young civil rights workers in the state of Mississippi. In English, the name of a river always carries the definite article “the,” but the name of a state never does. But I felt so guilty and nervous that I didn’t notice the lack of the article. I didn’t realize that he was talking about a state, much less that he was reading an article about a sad chapter in American history that one day would be the theme of the movie *Mississippi Burning*.

ANOTHER WRITING ABOUT BILL UNDERHILL FROM MY MEMOIR *The Sands of Pima Arroyo*:

One summer, Bill Underhill's dad took me and some older guy out night fishing in a rowboat on Long Lake. I started using a Hula Popper by the Fred Arbogast Company, makers of the Jitterbug. The Hula Popper has a little rubber skirt attached to it and I guess one day when Fred Arbogast looked at the skirt some bell rang in his head and he thought it looked like a hula skirt and he went crazy and put a Hawaiian theme in his products. Thus, you could buy a Hawaiian Wiggler, a Hawaiian Spoon, a Hula Popper, a Hula Dancer ("Small but Mighty!" the ad went.) and so on. The Hawaiian theme really seems silly to me.

Anyway, the Hula Popper was (and is) in my opinion pretty worthless. I caught some rock bass on it, but then I switched to Steve's yellow Jitterbug, which I had borrowed, and soon had hooked a huge largemouth bass. I fought him until he was at the side of the boat, but then I foolishly tried to lift him aboard and the hooks were torn out of his mouth by his out-of-water weight. The bass crashed back into the lake and the Jitterbug whipped into the air at the end of the line.

"What did you do that for?" Asked Jim Underhill. "I was going to grab him by the lower jaw."

When I got home I was still crushed by the incident and the next day Bill Underhill came up and said, "Hey, my dad says you're a lousy fisherman."

"He did?"

"Yeah," Bill laughed. "He says you horse 'em in, and that that bass must have weighed four pounds!"

#### ANOTHER WRITING ABOUT BILL UNDERHILL:

I remember word for word what Mr. McDonald the owner of the trading post said. We were listening to music on the jukebox in the store, and he said, "Those are the Beatles, I believe."

That was rather astute for an old guy back then. Bill Underhill, a friend of mine, said very kindly, "Actually, those are the Dave Clark Five, but sometimes they sound like the Beatles."

"Ah!" said Mr. McDonald, apparently happy to have learned.