

When the Fish are Rising

Tales of the Rideau Lakes

By Clint Fleming Published 1947 Kingston Public Library

Clint Fleming was a fishing guide out of Chaffey's Locks

The following excerpt, dealing with a fishing adventure on Buck Lake, is taken from Chapter 13 entitled "The Laker That Got Away". It features two characters, Clint Fleming, the author and fishing guide, and an American fisherman referred to as Major Mac, "a sucker for any new gadget that appeared on the market", one of which was the ineffective spring-loaded gaff referred to in the tale.

(The Major) wanted to fish Buck Lake. It is a beautiful body of water with a picturesque, rocky shoreline, and is famous for its big lakers. I liked to fish them, and with no one more than Major Mac. He was a keen, experienced fisherman and knew how to use his fine equipment - Richardson rod, three or four single-and-multiple-action reels, five hundred feet of the best single-strand 20-gauge wire, and (his) amazing assortment of artificial lures, sufficient to put a man up in the tackle business.

We drove the twenty miles to the lake and rented a boat from Herb Sears¹ and started out. We fished around Buck Island, in very deep water, trying for a big one, spent considerable time on a grand gravel bar with from forty to sixty feet of water. We dragged

and bumped over it in different places four or five times before we caught our first fish, an eight-pound trout. It was enough and more than we needed for dinner. It was noon; we went ashore.

While we were eating, the Major said, "I want you to use that new gaff on the next fish we get to the boat."

I wasn't enthusiastic and said so in no uncertain terms. I used an old-fashioned gaff and got along with it just fine. This wasn't the first spring gaff I had seen, but I had never used one. A friend of

mine, who had, told me they would twist in your hand when the spring was released and that a big fish would have little difficulty getting away. I could believe it.

There didn't seem to be any need of worrying about it that afternoon. We fished for about three hours and both of us were ready to quit, when the Major got a heavy hit. When the first "chugging" started, I knew it was a big fish. The first spell of chugging over, Major Mac reeled in seventy-five to a hundred feet of wire.

That laker no sooner felt himself being lifted from the bottom than he put on his second act for us. If you still have your fish after that second war dance, you are pretty sure of boating him.

¹ Herb Sears was the father of Don Sears who once lived with his wife Dorothy in the log house on the west side of the highway about 300 yards north of the culvert. Don once owned the property on both sides of the culvert, including the cottage where Roy and Sandra Mills lived until recently. He rented boats, dockage, and for a considerable period into the early 1970s, sold gasoline right at the culvert. He sold his property to Rick Smith in the '70s.

The Major came through with flying colours and after thirty minutes, gaining a little line on the fish, I could see in back of the boat a laker that would weight up to thirty pounds.

I was excited and the Major plenty warm and very anxious to land the prize. He told me to get the gaff ready. I glanced at the thing dubiously as the boat drifted and he reeled in the remaining sixty feet of wire. I knew I was as ready as I'd ever be.

When Major Mac had the fish on the surface, some two feet from the boat, I struck with the gaff. The button wouldn't release and I had to slap it. It went off with a bang and twisted in my hand just as Ernie had told me it would.

Even so, I hit the fish just ahead of the dorsal fin. That big laker acted as though it had stepped on a live wire. With one mighty lunge it struck the side of the boat with its tail and got leverage enough to throw the hook and shake itself out of the jaws of the

gaff. It lay there on the surface for a second. Before I could do anything, it revived enough to plunge to the bottom with a rush. I glanced at the gaff. There were a few scales on each of the four claws. With a bang, I flung the damned thing down on the bottom of the boat. I had heard the Major explode on previous occasions, but I knew this would top all past performances.

He really went to town. I couldn't blame him. It didn't help any to tell him I felt worse about losing the fish than he did.

"I came a thousand miles for a chance like that!" he shouted. "I catch the fish, bring it to the boat, and you lose it for me with your clumsiness! You've ruined my vacation!"

I had pleaded guilty, but the more he piled it on, the less I felt that it was altogether my fault that fish had got away. I hadn't wanted to use his crazy gadget. I had told him so. But he had insisted. I finally got my back up and reminded him of the fact.

The air around the boat was colder than a stepmother's heart for the rest of the afternoon. We had got the strike just off Hell's Hole. We worked that water for fully an hour without getting so much as another tick. (The Hole was well known because a murderer² had hid out there for three months and wouldn't have been caught even then if his wife hadn't given him away to the police for ten dollars and actually led them to his hiding place.)

It was getting late, and I was thoroughly disgusted. The Major was still so burnt up that he wasn't fishing his best.

"I've had enough of this." I declared finally. "It will be after ten o'clock before we get home. Wind in that cussed line and let's go!"

The Major did, in cold silence. We were almost to the landing when he said, apologetically: "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, Clint. That was a beautiful fish to lose." "If you didn't fall for every piece of junk you see advertised, we'd be taking that

laker home with us tonight." I remarked pointedly.

² Elijah VanKoughnet, who was later convicted in 1881 of killing John Richardson at his farm on the North Branch near the end of Neva Lane where Duncan and Leona Sinclair live now. He was the last man hung in Frontenac County.

He winced and shook his head. "You better engage the boat for tomorrow. We'll try it again."

"Not with your gaff," I said flatly.

"Take it home with you and leave it there!" he snapped. "I don't want to see the confounded thing again!"

Next morning, before getting into the car, we made our peace with each other. I did the driving and bowled along at a good clip. By nine o'clock we were back at Herb's landing. We loaded our duffel and started to fish. A rather stiff wind was blowing and it held us into the lee of Buck Island. It was the same water we had fished the previous day. Try as we would, we couldn't get a hit. It got around to lunchtime. We didn't have a fish, but the Major suggested we go ashore and make a pot of coffee and some bread-and-butter sandwiches. We didn't mind having been skunked; we wanted a big one or none.

We spent some time on the island. There didn't seem to be any point in going out again until the wind dropped. The Major said if we could get in an hour or two toward evening, he'd be satisfied. The wind swung around to the south-west about three o'clock and began to fall. We got into the boat. Though the lake was still choppy, we started fishing, but without any improvement in our luck.

About four-thirty the Major caught bottom, pulled free, and immediately got hung up again. It wasn't a fish, I was sure. I took the rod and began to wind in the line. As soon as I did, I knew he had caught hold of some old wire that another fisherman had lost, perhaps months before.

We were on good territory and I didn't relish messing it up just to

unhook an old line. I tried every trick I knew to get free. I jerked the rod, let out line, shook it violently. But nothing doing! I reeled in until I got to the fouled wire and brought it in hand over

hand and saw a laker - about an eight-pound fish - coming to the surface. It was dead, and had been for a week, I judged. I was curious to see what sort of a lure the fish had hit. It proved to be what has since become known as the "George Green Lure."³ Thousands of them have been sold. The largest lake trout I ever saw was caught on one, and it weighted forty pounds and four ounces.

The small laker was so soft that I was able to shake it off the hook. After removing the lure, I tossed the wire back into the lake to give some other fisherman a thrill. I asked Major Mac to try the lure we had just picked up.

"Drag this thing for an hour and we'll get a hit that'll be worthwhile." He eyed the homemade bait rather skeptically. "It's all right," I assured him. "A lot of them are being used on Devil Lake. The old

fellow who rents me a boat had an eighteen-pounder hanging in his icehouse that he had caught on one. For small fish, he claimed you should bend the spoon so it has a quick, spinning action and not so wide an overall action. For big fish, flatten it out so it won't

wobble but dart off right and left with a zig-zag motion."

³ Here, the author is wrong. The lure to which he refers is the Johnny Green lure, invented in about 1927 by the father of Archie (Bill Green's father), Alfie (Ronald, Elmer, and Paul Green's father). Bill, Ronald, and Elmer Green still live on Buck Lake. The story of The Johnny Green lure was published in a previous edition of the Buck Lake Newsletter

Major Mac let me put it on. He dragged it until he was weary. It didn't look as though we were going to connect with that big one (or even a little one) we were after. But the ideal time of day for

fishing lakers was just coming up. The wind was still falling and the chop was flattening out of the water.

It didn't seem to help. About a quarter after five we were on the same gravel where we'd lost the big one the day before and the Major got a terrific hit. He sat up quickly, his weariness forgotten, and

began to reel in. The first hard chugging started. The Major stayed with it, and we still had our fish.

From then on he just reeled in steadily and in twenty minutes had the fish alongside. I used my old gaff, but breathed a sigh of relief when I had that laker in the boat. We weren't able to weigh it until we got home. It had dried out a little by that time but still tipped the scales at twenty-eight pounds.

We admired the fish and examined it closely as it lay in the boat. It was the twin of the one that had got away, or the same one, as the Major contended. I couldn't agree with him. There were twin streaks on both sides of its back, an inch or so in front of the dorsal, where the scales had been knocked off. The spring gaff could have left similar scars, but I thought they were old and that the fish had run into a gill net when young and had broken free.

The Major was feeling too good to do much arguing. "You take a pattern of that lure tonight," he said. "We might lose this one tomorrow." I took the pattern and made up several of the lures for him. We fished lakers for a

week and used it exclusively, with excellent luck. Before it was purchasable, I made up a dozen or more for my own use out of various metals such as copper, nickel, and brass.

Duncan G. Sinclair March, 2013

Published in the April 2013 Newsletter