

# Reflections

BY JIM MIZE\*

Illustration by Doug Schermer

## The Jonboat Years

The first boat I owned was a jonboat. I bought it over a sack lunch from a co-worker at a Corps of Engineers lake. Twelve feet long, it was a stubby square-nosed aluminum boat and came with a dented 3-hp Eska outboard and a clamp-on electric motor. The whole rig cost me \$75, which hints at how long ago this transaction occurred.

For the seller, the money meant new archery equipment for the coming fall. For me, the boat meant a level of freedom in fishing that only a jonboat can bring.

I had a 1967 Mustang back then and I fitted it with cartop racks. I could slide the boat onto the roof by standing it on end and slowly leaning it until the bow hit a rack. Then I simply lifted the boat from the stern and slid it forward. Once on top, I tied the boat off on each bumper, threw straps over the middle, and carried the rest of my gear in the trunk.

With the limited range of the small outboard, I always tried to put in close to where I fished. While working at the lake, I learned every road and fire trail that ran to the water so this was no problem. To launch, I merely took the boat off the car, filled it with my gear, and then dragged it to the water by the two handles on the stern. The whole process took only minutes.

You might think not having any sophisticated electronics could be a handicap, but growing up on a lake you learn more about its structure than you realize. All those years of getting lures hung taught me where the submerged trees were. The nights of pulling up an anchor by hand helped me locate the deep holes and creek channels. All I missed were the blips of fish on a screen, but watching for other signs filled in the blanks.

Schools of shad often dimpled the lake surface, so when I trolled I swung around them dragging my lures through the middle going from school to school. Usually the fish weren't far away. Also, bass rarely feed quietly in the

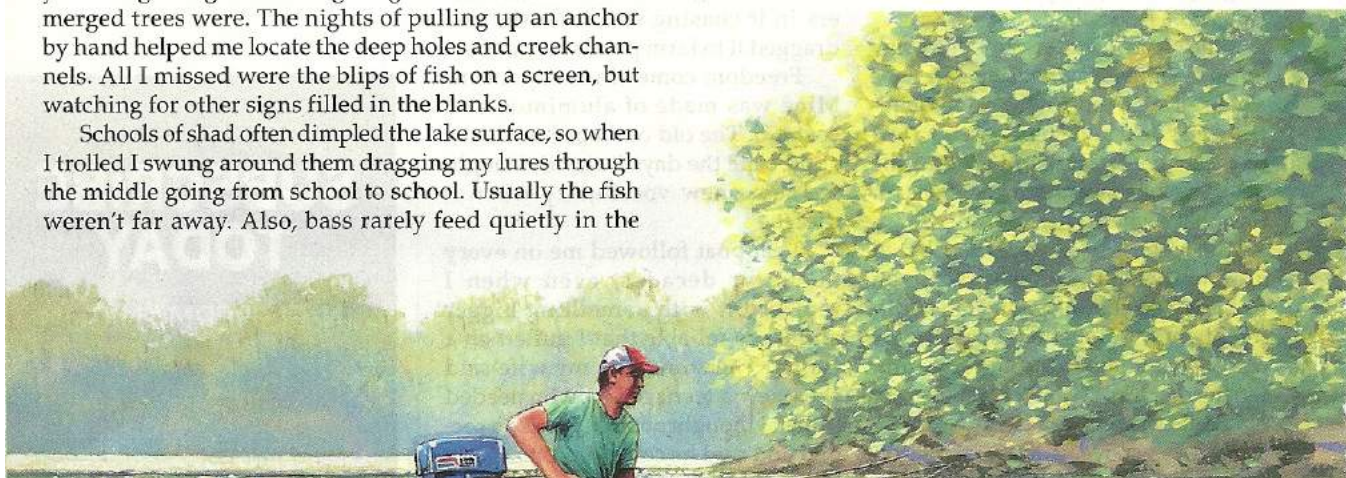
shallows so when water blew up it could only be one thing. Instead of staring at a screen, I merely watched the water. And I caught fish.

My days off from work generally came during the week as I worked the campgrounds on weekends. That was fine by me as a quiet lake better served the needs of a small boat.

One June morning I put in by the dam to troll the deep water for trout. I clamped rod holders on either side of the boat for two rods. On one side I ran lead line on a saltwater Penn reel. On the other, I fished a Mitchell 300 with a deep-running crankbait. The two lines ran different depths so they could pass each other on turns and never tangle.

The outboard was old when I got it and now would qualify for a fishing museum. It never held the same speed for various reasons. If trash or condensation got in the gas it would sputter to a halt and my lead line would sink while the floating crankbait rose. Usually, I could start the motor and get moving again before the lead line hit bottom.

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When the motor got low on gas it would speed up, cut out, and speed up again. The gas tank was small and I generally had to refill it once or twice a day when I stayed on the water.

The trout seemed to like the erratic movement of my baits resulting from the inconsistent outboard. That morning, as it was getting late enough to feel warm, I was trolling through a deep section of the main channel. I had been following a shaded bank that dropped sharply into the lake until I made a 90-degree turn back toward the middle. Just as my lines curved, the outboard died.

It took a few pulls, plus some muttering, which always seemed to help, and as my lines went slack, the motor caught. It caused the boat to jump and my lines popped back into action. The rod with the lead line bowed and back toward the bank a rainbow went airborne.

I cut the motor and played the fish. My lead line always lagged behind the location of the fish so I kept my eyes ahead to guess where it would jump next. Leaping and fighting in the warm water at the surface, the fish finally became exhausted and I slid the fat four-pound rainbow into my net. From a hefty diet of shad, it had developed a sagging belly and a bright pink stripe. By local standards, this was a fine fish.

The electric motor came into play when bluegills spawned. Bluegill have a habit of spawning in the same vicinities every year and I had learned a few of these places scattered around the lake. So when I wanted a good mess of fish, that's where I headed.

Since these beds were distributed around the lake, I often drove in on fire roads or slid the jonboat in at different entry points up the lake to get close. That outboard would have gotten me there, but I didn't want to grow old while it did.

One long cove had several beds in it not far apart. I could put in halfway up the lake, run around a point and turn west, then go a mile and I would be on the first bed.

Usually I would use the electric motor to ease down the bank until I could see the pock-marked bottom resembling craters on the moon. Then I'd drop a mushroom anchor on a nylon rope and tie it off on the stern.

Fishing for bluegills on their beds is more fun than a wash tub full of puppies. My usual approach was to cast a small foam spider over the bed and just let it sit. Before long, a thick-shouldered bluegill would rise and smack his lips on the bug.

At that point, I'd set the hook and watch the bluegill dart, shimmy, and angle away from the boat. The chunky ones went in the cooler for supper.

When you spend your workdays in the woods lunching on Beene Weenees, a fried bluegill supper qualifies as fine dining. I'd fillet the largest ones, dip them in a slurry of eggs and milk, and then roll them in a powder of cornmeal, flour, salt, and pepper. When the fillets hit the grease, they would sputter until they turned golden brown. Then I'd serve them with hushpuppies and baked beans, dipping the fish in cocktail sauce like fried shrimp. To this day, the memory of those dinners makes me hungry.

After catching what seemed to be the volunteers off a bed, I'd move on to the next one. Rightly or wrongly, I believed that the secret to having them back next year in the same spot was to leave a spawning population.

When fall came, that jonboat went back to college with me. I floated rivers in it chasing smallmouths and dragged it to farm ponds for panfish.

Freedom comes in many forms. Mine was made of aluminum and cost \$75. The old outboard made me appreciate the days it ran and taught me some new vocabulary when it didn't.

That boat followed me on every move for decades, even when I replaced it with something bigger and more reliable that I pulled on a trailer. Then, one day, my wife said she knew a teenage boy who needed a boat. I thought about it just for a second and said he could have it.

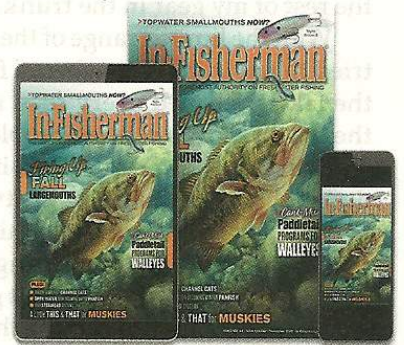
Freedom like that needs to be passed on. ■

\*Jim Mize, a frequent contributor to the Reflections column, still gets to fish from small boats. His two award-winning books of humor and nostalgia for outdoorsmen can be found at [acreektricklesthrouahit.com](http://acreektricklesthrouahit.com).

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