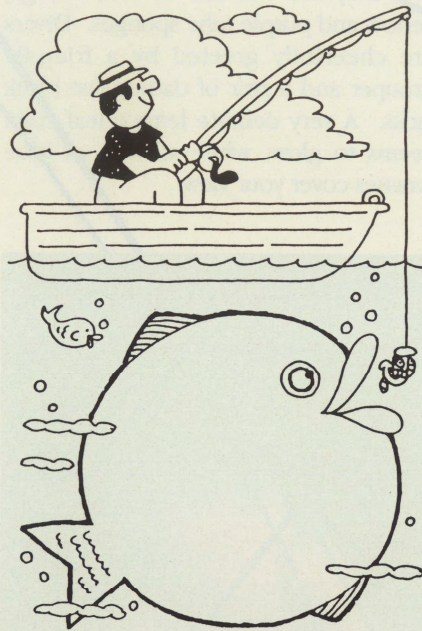


GOIN' FISHIN'

BY HILLARY HAUSER

"GOIN' FISHIN' LUKE?"
"YEP!"
"GOT WORMS?"
"YEP, BUT I'M GOIN' ANYHOW."



Once upon a time, I set out to sea with my brother in a little skiff from Miramar Beach. We were 9 and 10 year-old kids with big plans: we were going to bring back so many fish that our mother would feed the family for a week. We had with us the ultimate gear and tackle — a spool of twine and a big safety pin. For bait, we were going to use hot dogs, cut up in little pieces.

It took us a half a package of hot dogs to catch our one fish, some sort of perch. That very night, my brother and I had to eat that fish — our first lesson in never wasting anything we took from the sea. While I poked around at the perch on my plate, I wished I could have just eaten the half package of hot dogs instead.

But I never forgot what it was like to wait for that fish. The chance of a nibble or bite is what makes fishing one of the oldest, most popular of pastimes. Perched on a rugged rock at the edge of the sea, or on the beach, in a dinghy, along the rail of a pier or a sportfishing boat, a fisherman can be totally content with this solitary waiting game. It is a meditation interrupted only by a rough nibble at the end of a line. The nibbles cause the heart to leap into high speed; a good, solid catch makes the soul soar.

The up and down, on-off nature of the fishing game makes each nibble, each bite, a good-natured bet with oneself. Will I or won't I get the big one this time? It is roller-coaster recreation — sea battles mixed with dreaming, one's fate cast to the winds, the tides, and the whims of the fish.

I don't think I ever fished again with rod and reel until 15 years later, when I was digging around for gold in Canyon Creek, a small river in California's mother lode country. While my partner dredged an enormous hole along one side of the river, I sat on a sunny rock on the opposite side with a fishing pole, using a jar of iridescent orange salmon eggs for bait. I have to confess that my main goal was dinner and that as I waited for a bite from one of the local trouts, I was not meditating on the glories of nature in that grand, outdoor arena. Instead, I read one of the raucous Marquis de Sade books that had been left in the abandoned cabin where my partner and I had set up camp. But it was then and there that I realized my permanent inability to get a poor, struggling fish off a hook. Even though I steeled myself each time I caught a trout, the hooked fish would wiggle in my hand and I'd jump and drop it. Sometimes, my gold-digging partner had to leap across the river and rescue me from this predicament.

Not too long ago, my friend Fred Benko, who captains the charter fishing boat *Condor* out of the Santa Barbara Harbor, attempted to teach me how to fish. We went to Horseshoe Reef, about two miles off the coast, with a boatload of his paying passengers. I spent a lot of time studying these passengers. They were doctors, lawyers, gardeners and farmers from the midwest on vacation. Sue, the galley girl, told me that at sea all fishermen are created equal. The odds of catching fish are the same for everyone who fishes, she said. A seven-year-old has just as much of a chance to hook a fish as an 80-year-old.

I wasn't too sure about this piece of information when Fred put a pole in my hand, pointed to the live-bait well on the boat and told me to get going. I didn't have the nerve to tell him that the only bait I could handle was hot dogs and tamed salmon eggs from a jar. Nevertheless, I grabbed a wiggling anchovy from the well and tried my best to match it up with my hook. I was still standing there with this squirmy thing in my hand, trying to figure out the least painful place to put the hook into it, when about two dozen eager fishermen began to cast off, with hooks, lines and sinkers flying every which way. It was a miracle of nature that no one snagged anyone else by the seat of the pants.

I still had the poor, by-now-not-so-wiggly anchovy in my hand when someone yelled, "Yellowtail!"

The fisherman who had hooked it began to follow the fish in its underwater flight by walking his rod around the rail of the boat. That meant that the other fishermen had to let him pass under, around or over themselves and their tackle, and I was astonished that all of these lines didn't mingle.

Meanwhile, the deckhand continued to throw anchovies over the side, to chum the water and attract more fish to the area.

Smack. An anchovy hit me in the head. The deckhand apologized.

Another fisherman was using squid instead of anchovies for bait. He cast off, making a big, wide arc with his pole, but the squid went flying off the hook. It sailed through the air with all ten tentacles spread out, looking like a big rubbery falling star.

Just as I laughed at this spectacle, another anchovy hit me in the head.

I was still fooling around with all this when Fred came around and saw that I

hadn't yet gotten my line into the water. He threw my poor anchovy over the side, saying something like live bait must resemble live bait.

"Stick it here, next to the eye," he said, hooking on two jumping anchovies.

He showed me how to cast off: turn

your back to the rail, make a big arc in the air with the pole, and when the sinker hits the water, clamp a thumb down on the spool so that the line stops reeling out.

Except when I did it, I didn't clamp down on the spool soon enough and instantly there was a tangled ball of

monofilament line under my thumb.

"Uh oh," said the fishermen next to me. "You'd better walk home."

I considered doing just that because by the time I realized I was never going to get the mess untangled, a fish had attached itself to the other end of my line. I couldn't reel it in and I couldn't work out the snarls, so I stood there and waited. Luckily, the fish got away.

As I watched everyone else throw out more anchovies on their lines, to trade them for the bigger fish coming in, I realized that fishing is like a big swap meet at sea.

The uncertainty of that swap makes fishermen go back again and again — to their boats, to the seashore, to the piers and docks that dot the coastline. Usually, fishing is a quiet, solitary activity, a time of contemplation. Time goes by quickly when one is engrossed in his own thoughts, surrounded by the blessed solitude of a beach, the quiet of a rocky point or the privacy of one's own stern deck — where a mind can wander while the bait dangles in a dark underwater place. It is serene meditation, interrupted only by the sudden muscular grabbing of a line.

It is also a time of thinking fish thoughts. No one can say exactly what "fish sense" is, but it has to do with a cosmic vibration that emanates from the fisherman's mind to his fingertips, to the end of his rod, down the line, to the end of the wiggling bait, then out to the fish of the sea. There seems to be no other explanation for one fisherman catching something while another one comes up empty-handed — even though both are using identical gear and are fishing in the same place.

I'm still troubled by wiggling baits and live fish on the end of my line, and I think I'd be just as happy out at sea or along a deserted beach holding a pole with absolutely nothing on the end of my line. For this reason, I'm comforted to know that catching the fish is not the sole reason fishermen fish. You can see this by watching them as they sit and wait quietly, with their thoughts as sole company. If the fish are biting, so much the better — the fisherman has his dinner. But if the fish are not cooperative, the fisherman can still take home the priceless catch of his own thoughts.