

Gigging for Carp

When we were boys, when it was spring and the icemelt from the bay would flood the creeks and marshlands and the carp would come up into the warmer shallow water to spawn, on weekends and spring break from school my friends and I would take a bus to the edge of town and hike down to where Five Mile Creek emptied into the bay and we would go gigging for carp.

One year, when we were eleven or twelve, when we got there the water was alive with carp, their brown backs and dorsal fins breaking the surface like sharks roiling among the cattails and willow. The gigging was so good Jimmy and I had twenty or so ten pounders or more laid out on the bank in no time, some over two feet long. The biggest catch ever. Then we had to get them home.

First we found an old cottonwood branch thin enough to slip through their mouths and out their gills and strong enough to bear their weight. With our jack knives we stripped off the twigs and leaves, then, with some difficulty, hoisted the pole onto our shoulders and headed for home. After a few minutes, we stopped to rest, and rub our shoulders.

After another short walk, and another rest, we were sure we'd never make it home before dark like we were supposed to. But not having much of a choice, we set off again. After a few more starts and stops we got back to the bus stop where we'd started. No chance of getting on a bus with the carp, but there at the intersection was a phone booth.

We knew we didn't have enough change between us to pay for a taxi home from way out there, but figured maybe, with luck (and we had proof it was our lucky day) we could trade the driver some carp for a ride.

So I put a dime in the phone and after a while a yellow cab pulled up. The driver, a gray-haired black man, got out of the cab and after sizing up the situation — two very tired bedraggled boys with muddy shoes, pants wet above the knees, a lot of fish and no money — agreed to drive us back home for six caviar-heavy carp. He opened the trunk, spread some papers, we dumped the carp and our gigging poles in, and off we went.

When we got home, we tossed the carp on the grass by the curb, he picked the ones he wanted and drove off. When my mother came out we told her the story while some neighbors watched from their porches. Then we put the carp back on the pole and carried them into the back yard. Jimmy put the ones he wanted into a burlap bag my mother produced, slung it over his shoulder and headed home.

When my dad got home from work, we gave some to neighbors, cleaned and scaled the rest, buried their heads and entrails around the roses deep enough to keep the dog and cat out. And we had carp for dinner all week.