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A Fishing Trip With an Agenda

By DEAN NELSON

IT was at Big Sand Lake in northern Minnesota, a family vacation place I hadn't seen for more than 30 years, in a rowboat I am certain I had used in the 1960's, above the sandbar where my grandfather -- my idol, now deceased -- had taught me to fish, during a moment where three generations of infrequent fishermen gloated over the size of a new catch, on the last day of our vacation, that my son, Blake, 14, first heard me swear.

Blake had just reeled in the biggest fish anyone in our family had caught during that week. He had caught lots of little perch in the previous days. The sandbar that had produced so many northern pike for me when I was young was now spitting out perch as fast as I could put night crawlers on his hook. Many mornings, as we rowed out while the sun came up, with oars squeaking louder than the loons' trill, I thought about trolling in that lake with my grandfather. I had visions of my son doing the same, but everyone in Park Rapids I spoke to said the northern pikes had been fished out. I like to think I had a little something to do with that. It put a swagger in my rowing.

So this year we fished from a still boat, not a moving one. The same landmarks my grandfather used more than 30 years ago helped me find the underwater hillside. I lined up the boat between two cabin coordinates and drew imaginary lines from them. At the intersection I dropped anchor.

Most mornings I did not have time to bait my own hook. Fish hopped on Blake's offerings as if he were a subway at rush hour. Of course he didn't want to cut the worms into sections, put them on a hook, get that slime all over his hands, or take the fish off the hook. I had grown up in Minnesota, so it wasn't unseemly to me. We now live in San Diego, where, even when we go deep-sea fishing, we are somewhat typical Californians who have servants do our labor for us. Someone is there to bait hooks, untangle lines, unhook the fish and even fillet them so that when we reach shore we are handed our bag of ready-to-cook whatever.

At Big Sand Lake, though, I was the labor. For the most part I didn't mind. I enjoyed the role reversal of when my grandfather did these things for me. I loved him fiercely when we were fishing.

On this trip I used my grandfather's tackle box. It just seemed right to pull out those old lures, still in their small cardboard boxes, with hardware-store price tags. He helped me start a collection when I was young. I was attracted to the wood-carved little fish with multiple hooks dangling from them. I figured that if I liked them, so would fish. But he insisted that, regardless of how much they looked like fish, they wouldn't work nearly so well as his red-and-white spoon-shaped lure that spun and guttered underwater. He was right, of course.

Preparing for this recent trip, I spread my grandfather's tackle on a table on my back porch. Some of the hooks and gear were more than 50 years old. I remembered the poems he would recite on the lake, trying to convince fish that his bait was desirable. He and my grandmother were devout Christians, so much so that they cut short their time with us one summer when I was about 10, after they learned that my brothers and cousins and I were going swimming on Sunday. Activity like that was a breach of a commandment. I hadn't thought of that incident since the last time that box was open.

Overall, though, those days of summer vacation with my grandparents were the highlights of growing up. My wife had heard me talk about this vacation place for years, and she had seen the small reels of home movies taken there. We know that the memories of those we hold dear reside in the places we hold dear, so we decided to re-create the experience as much as we could.

One of my brothers and his family could go. My parents were up for it. I called Evergreen Lodge, the place we had gone virtually every summer until I was a teenager. Kay Dyre, the proprietor for more than 40 years, answered the telephone. Her husband, Carl, had just retired from teaching social studies at Park Rapids High School. She said she remembered my family, and I asked about the big house. It was available for the week we wanted. The house, built in 1909 by a homesteading lumberjack, was slated to come down in the next year or so, but it was ready for one more visit from my family, she said.

THAT'S when I became fearful. Was I setting myself up for a disappointment? So many things and people from childhood take on mythic proportions over the years that when they are revisited the memory bursts like a water balloon. Would Park Rapids, population 2,900, a respite from the Twin City life for so many years, be just another tourist town? It was worth the risk, I thought. The memories I had were worth trying to establish in the lives of my kids. Also, I wanted to see if the memory of my grandfather was still lingering somewhere near the sandbar on that lake.

I was relieved to see that cars still parked in the middle of the street in the business district of Park Rapids, a practice begun to accommodate the logging trucks being loaded there decades ago. The friendliness of the store owners was still there, judging by the note the barber left on his door saying that he wasn't feeling well and that he was sorry, but he had to go home early. Cashiers still said "You betcha," and the U.P.S. driver even said "Ya, sure, you betcha." The ice cream shop, now called Minne-Soda, was still there. Deer Town, where kids can walk up to tame deer to feed and pet them, was still there. People can still walk across the headwaters of the Mississippi River at Itasca State Park. At Big Sand Lake, I could still see the bottom, and millions of minnows, from the end of the dock. Loons still pierced the mornings with their calls that reverberated across the lake's plexiglass surface. Animals still wandered freely through the cabin area in the evening. Fireflies appeared at first dark, like shooting stars at eye level. And the mosquitoes were so thick at night that, given the opportunity, they could still reduce a grown man to tears in a matter of seconds.

The little Methodist church we attended is no longer there. It seated about 50 people. When the pastor announced a hymn, he would say, "Those with blue hymnals, turn to number 61. Those with red hymnals turn to 25." They couldn't afford uniformity. After our first year there, my grandfather sent Reverend Tracy his infrequently worn suits.

On our last morning, with my son in the stern and my father in the bow, I held the smallmouth bass Blake had just caught. It was a fighter. It had taken Blake's line toward the middle of the lake, but he, now a veteran, expertly played it and brought it in. Still, he wanted me to get the hook out. "There are two great feelings," he proclaimed, sounding like a native Minnesotan. "One is when a baseball hits the sweet spot of your bat, and the other is when a fish bites your hook."

I had announced something very similar to my grandfather, in this very place.

Just as I was pulling the hook out, though, the fish charged again and buried the hook deep into my thumb. "You're no Paul Cunningham," it seemed to say, invoking the spirit of my grandfather.

I never heard my grandfather swear. Fish respected him too much to do to him what this one did to me. Everything else around us was the same as it had been for 31 years. The lodge, the proprietors, the lake, the boats, the town. But I still had a way to go to become my idol.

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