

Outdoors

How it all began

Port Aransas waters had never seemed so dead as in the summer of 1950. I couldn't buy a bite anywhere ... surf, piers, jetties, passes or bays.

So I went to see Bill Ellis, the owner-in-residence of the historic Tarpon Inn. Bill was also the Angling Oracle of Mustang Island. From his favorite chair on the Inn's porch, he seemed eerily aware of where and what kind of fish were being caught, by whom, on what kind of bait, how big, together with prevailing status of tide, moon and weather. He didn't fish much, but his knack for knowing what was going on was uncanny.

He listened to my litany of frustration and said, "Sometimes there are pike running on an outgoing tide this time of day down on Kline's Point."

"Pike" was the name commonly used for snook in South Texas in those days.

Today, Kline's Point sports high-priced condominiums, but in 1950 it was just a deserted strip of beach separated from the Corpus Christi Ship Channel by a low breakwater of granite boulders. Except for a heron and a couple of gulls, I had it all to myself.

I stood at the water's edge and studied the scene. The sun was setting and the evening onshore breeze was calming. The only sounds were of the tide boiling against the breakwater rocks.

Or ... was that a fish striking? The longer I stood there, the more strongly I felt – well, maybe a premonition – a sense that this was the place to be, a feeling that something exciting was going to happen here ... I hurried to rig up, with a big Tony Acetta #7 spoon and 15 inches of stainless steel leader wire between the spoon and the line. The lure was stamped from thick brass, heavily chrome plated. It cast like a bullet and would give me give me extra range.

Dark had settled now, and I strapped on a headlight. Also, remembering warnings in snook-fishing articles about the species' razor-sharp gill covers, I hung a small finger-gaff – made by pushing a big shark hook with the barb flattened though a tapered cork to serve as a handle – through a belt-loop on my pants.

I tested the drag setting and waded cautiously into the warm water, feeling the tidal tug against my legs as a reminder that I was on my own. There would be nobody to hear a call for help if I stumbled into a tidal washout or stepped on a big sting ray.

Wading knee-deep, I fired a cast toward the line of foam marking the breakwater. After a few feet of retrieve, something slammed the spoon and the fight was on. I thought I heard the fish jump but couldn't get the headlight beam on the action.

After a few minuets' struggle, I could regain line and was thrilled to see the signature bold black horizontal side stripe of the snook in the gleam of my headlight. It was only about a four-pounder, but it was still my very first snook and quickly went into the ice chest.

The next strike came only a few casts later and felt like a bigger fish. It quickly demonstrated that my major problem on this night would be keeping hooked fish from making it into a break in the breakwater, where the rocks were encrusted with razor-sharp barnacles.

I learned to bear down on every strike instantly, turning the fish out of the powerful current and guiding it away from the rocks into an area

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John Wootters

where I could wear it down.

The second snook looked almost twice the size of the first and quickly joined it in the ice chest. The next two were so small that I released them even though Texas had no minimum legal sizes on saltwater species at that time.

Then came a much stronger fish that I guessed might be the fish of the night. I also discovered that my finger-gaff was gone, probably having floated off when I waded a bit too deep.

I managed to land the snook – maybe nine or 10 pounds – by beaching it by the leader wire.

After a slow stretch that almost convinced me that the run was over, there came a solid strike that made me wonder if I'd hung a big red-fish. After retreating to shallower water, I slugged it out with the fish, feeling none of the red's trademark bull-rushes and tailbanging on the leader. If this was a snook, it was bigger than any I'd felt until now – a lot bigger!

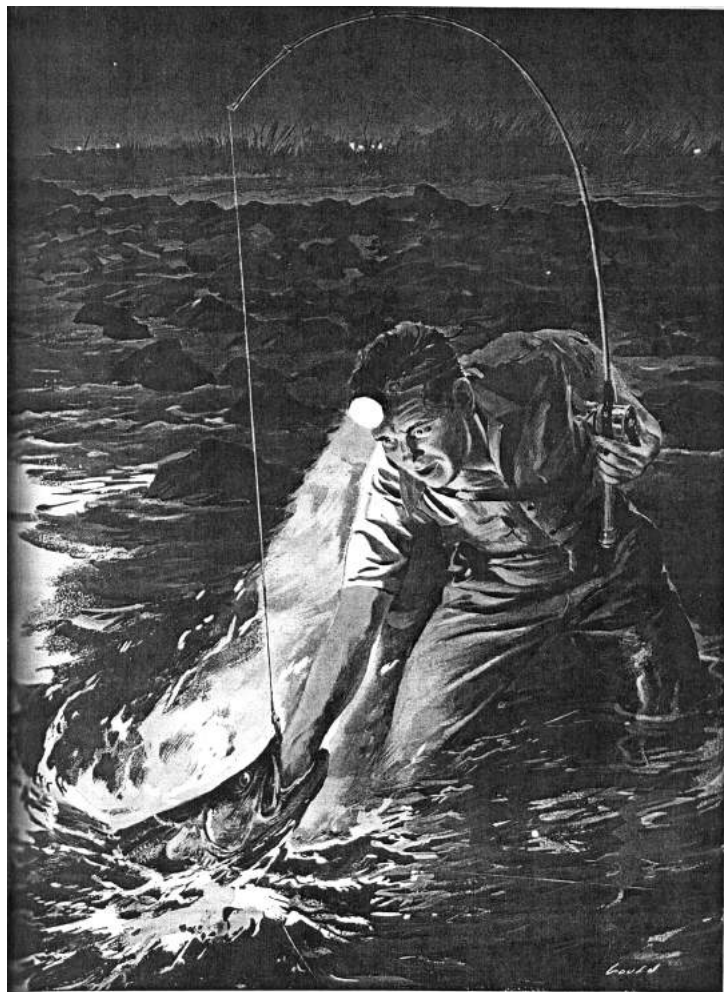
And it was boring straight for the deadly break in the rocks. I risked tightening the drag but found that it could still take line at will. I couldn't stop or turn the fish until it was well into the break. I calculated that if it got another inch of line the steel leader would no longer protect the line from the barnacles, the battle would be over, and I'd be the loser.

Grimly, I clamped down the reel spool, determined to break the fish off before letting it cut me off. With teeth clenched, I held desperately, not yielding an inch, hearing the guitar-string tight line singing in the breeze and expecting it to snap at any second.

But everything held and suddenly I saw a broad tail rise slowly above the water and execute a slow arc. My pressure had turned the fish, but the size of that tail scared me. I wasted no time leading the fish out of the current. It was totally whipped, lying on its broad side on the surface.

Then I noticed something that made my blood run cold; one of the treble hooks was holding only in a tiny filament of skin. I dared not try to drag it in by the leader. A single vigorous flop and it would be gone.

With my finger-gaff missing, I watched the exhausted fish gasping, his big mouth opening and closing as it regained strength. Still reluctant to risk serious cuts on the



This is the illustration commissioned by the Outdoor Life magazine editor for my snook story.

Upon acceptance of the snook story, Bill Rae, the legendary editor of Outdoor Life in 1950, requested that I furnish reference material from which his artist could work to produce an illustration. I went back to Port Aransas and made a series of photographs of myself in the actual setting where the episode had occurred and showing me, my clothes, equipment, and tackle exactly as it all had been that night. Here is one of the pictures from the series I posed for the artist, and it explains why the artist achieved such accurate detail in his painting, even making the fisherman's face resemble mine.



gill covers, I timed the jaws and when they were at maximum gape I thrust my hand deep into the toothless mouth and grabbed a fistful of whatever I could. Then I turned and ran for the car, throwing sheets of water in all directions. Far above the water's edge, I laid my prize down on the sand and sank down beside it.

How big was it? Having no scale available, I can only offer an estimate – and we all know about fishermen's estimates, don't we? Still, during the intervening years I've caught snook in Mexico about as long as that one and no less bulky and weighed them on certified scales at between 20 and 25 pounds.

story and submitted it to Outdoor Life magazine, where it was accepted and published in the June, 1954, issue. It was my first sale to a national magazine and the launching of a 50-year career that has seen more than 4-1/2 million words in print in virtually every periodical that published hunting and fishing material during those years.

John Wootters, of Ingram, is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.