



OLD PLUGS

BY JOHN WOOTTERS

You have to understand at the outset that I am not a *real* bass fisherman. You can tell just by looking at me and my gear. I don't own a polyester jumpsuit with a patch on the breast pocket. I don't own a bass boat (except for an inflatable, named "Riff-Raft") with more electronics than a Russian trawler. I do not possess a graphite rod with anything written on the shaft, nor a freshwater reel with line heavier than 6-pound-test.

I don't even own a worm-box, for pity's sakes! Not even one single swimming plug (that's what we used to call 'em: "swimming plugs") with a letter of the alphabet for a name.

Oh, I've got a tackle box full of lures, but not many of today's hard-core bass fishermen would ever have heard of most of them, unless they remembered the names from some article on collectibles. Names like Bass-Oreno, Speed Shad, Sputterfuss, Crazy Crawler, Pikie Minnow, River Runt, Lucky 13, Punkinseed, Devil's Horse . . . And get this: a lot of them are actually made of wood! That old Punkinseed is wooden, and so is a Midget Plunker and the Crippled Shad and a little jointed Pikie Minnow, and a bunch of others. What brings tears to the eyes of my friends who are very modern, "in" bass fishermen is that

The author is a Houston freelancer who has held on to his Bass-Oreno and Punkinseed lures, and swears that they still work best

these lures are not framed under glass; I actually *fish* with them. I mean, I fling 'em right out there in the water, among what the modern writers call stick-ups (I always thought of them as "stumps" or "stobs," pronounced "stawbs" in East Texas), and try to get largemouth bass to bite them.

I realize that all this dates me pretty badly, and maybe a little background will be helpful. Although I make no claim to being a real bass fisherman, I was one, once upon a time. It started with my grandfather, who was indeed a real bass fisherman. He had just two lures, a big, red-and-white Lucky 13 and something called a Tandem Spinner, which he would swish around in the deeper holes of little backwoods creeks in Houston County and extract therefrom largemouth black bass. One weighed over 8 pounds, and Granddad brought her home alive, filled the old-fashioned, ball-and-claw-legged bathtub, and revived the big fish. I must have been about eight years old, but the picture of that fish, finning wearily in the bathtub, is as vivid in my mind today as it was on my retinas at the time.

Anyway, Mister Bob, as everybody called him except those who called him "Sheriff" (which he was), taught me how to cast and how to judge bass water and how to work a lure and how much fun it was to have a bass swat a surface lure, whether or not you got the hooks into him.


All that was back in the 1930's and early '40's, and I guess there just weren't any real bass fishermen in those days, by modern standards. The mental picture of Granddad in a blue doubleknit polyester jumpsuit with a club patch and a "Hawg-Sticker" rod gives me a bad case of heartburn. Lordy, he never even heard of monofilament line!

Neither had I, back then. I saved up and purchased a rod, reel, and lure. The rod was of tapered steel, square in cross-section, and had all the action of a straightened-out coathanger. The reel was a good little Pflueger, filled with braided silk. The lure was a small Bass-Oreno, and I still have it.

My favorite fishing hole, back in the early days, was a water hazard on a fairway at the River Oaks Country Club. The caretaker permitted no little kids to fish there, of course, but I took pains to arrive before dawn on Saturdays while the caretaker was still in the sack, and would fish for an hour or so, keeping an eye out up the maintenance road for his vehicle. When it was plain he was on his way to run me off, I'd save him the trouble by leaping aboard my bicycle and pedaling like mad across the fair way, where I knew he wouldn't follow in a car, and into the woods.

There were some good bass in that little lake, and my Bass-Oreno usually accounted for two or three on my dawn raids. One day, however, I spotted the caretaker

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER MAGADINI

A painting of a young boy in a blue t-shirt and khaki pants, holding a fishing reel in his right hand and a string of colorful lures in his left. The lures include red and silver spinnerbaits, a silver crankbait, and a red and white spinner. In the background, a man's face wearing a cap and glasses is visible. A circular inset in the upper right shows a man in a hat and jacket holding a large fish. The scene is set outdoors, possibly near a pond or lake.

The wooden lures were worn reminders of the good days past—but their worth wasn't only in memories

on his way and began reeling like crazy. When the plug had zigzagged wildly halfway across the pond, the water bulged under it as though from a rising Loch Ness monster, and the Bass-Oreno started going in the other direction whether I liked it or not. Nobody had thought of an anti-reverse on a bait-casting reel in those innocent days, and I found my hands full fighting the fish from the thumbed reel. I refused to break off my one and only Bass-Oreno, even if it meant going to jail, which I was confident I was about to do, so I gritted my teeth and kept the tip up and sweated as the caretaker bore down on me like an advancing tornado.

He stopped the car and jumped out and ran toward me, yelling. I had expected him to yell a lot, so it took a moment for his words to sink in. "Stay with 'im, kid!" he was hollering. "Don't give him any slack!" With the single-minded logic of a thirteen-year-old, I decided to take first things first and land that fish.

"Watch 'im!" yelled the caretaker as the fish swirled and shook its awesome head above the water. "He's gonna jump! Don't lose 'im now!"


Despite the pictures on the covers of the bass magazines, largemouths as big as this one seldom jump cleanly, not in Texas, anyhow, and this one didn't. But there wasn't a square inch of surface in that half-acre water hazard that it didn't smash to foam. (Continued on page 166)

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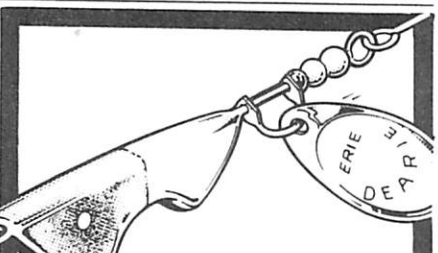
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Old plugs

(Continued from page 85)

I was thinking that it might be as big as the one in the bathtub and I was going to hang grimly in there until I was able to whip it or the police car actually arrived and they put the cuffs on me.

AT LAST I won, and led the fish into the shallows on its side. I was still staring, open-mouthed, at the size of it when the caretaker leaned out and expertly (I noticed) picked up the bass by the lower jaw. The little Bass-Oreno was hung delicately by just one hook in a twisted filament of jaw skin. The caretaker looked at the fish and then at me, and I looked back at both of them.

"She isn't hurt," he said quietly. "She'll live if you let her go, and she's probably nesting."

I had never released a largemouth bigger than about 10 inches before, but it suddenly dawned on me that the caretaker was giving me the choice. He was asking me, not telling me, what to do.

"What're you gonna do to me?" I mumbled.

"Nothin'," he replied, "except tell you to keep out of here. I'm afraid you'll get hit in the head with a golf ball. How about this fish?"

I thought it over for a minute, admiring my catch. It was not an easy decision for a thirteen-year-old.

"Put it back, I guess," I told him.

You sure, kid?" he asked again.

"Yeah, go ahead. Maybe I can catch..." I began, and then stopped in dismay, feeling stupid. He grinned and gently worked the hook free and slipped the big sow back into the pond. We both watched her waggle her fins feebly for a minute in the tea-colored water, her gills working spasmodically, before she turned abruptly and slid away.

"She'll make it okay," the caretaker remarked. "Now, kid, you get your stuff and get outa here. No, don't go across the fairway; it's wet. Go up past the tee and cut across... and don't let me catch you here again. Okay?"

I'll never know how big that bass really was, but I don't think it's just a boyhood memory that makes her seem like 6 or 7 pounds at least. I could never get her to strike again, so I never weighed her. And, obediently, I never did let the caretaker catch me in there again.

A few years after that I became terribly fascinated with saltwater fishing and almost abandoned the bigmouths. But there were a couple of summers spent fishing for stream bass in the small, secret, sand-bedded creeks of the Texas Piney Woods. Except for the deeper pools near the bridges, I had the creeks to myself. Wading is not a tradition in this part of the world, and wading was the only way to present lures to the bright little bass of the fast water. Three pounds, more or less, was my best creek

fish, and my best day was one on which I strung three 3-pounders and half a dozen smaller ones, all taken on a spinning-sized Arbogast Hula Popper. To cast such lures on a conventional plugging rig, I had removed the level-wind mechanism (which removed most of the friction in the reel) and developed an extremely delicate touch with my thumb, level-winding on the retrieve with my fingers. I'd flip the tiny popper upstream and cross-current and let it drift into eddies behind lodged driftwood, then twitch it lightly. The eddy would explode with green and bronze and crimson gills, and my soul would expand a little.

I imagined that this kind of fishing was the Texas equivalent of the dainty, refined, dry-fly fishing for trout which I'd read so much about. And years later when I'd tried the Northern and Western streams with flies, I knew I'd been right.

Those days in the brooding pines, following the liquid sunlight of a creek, were among the most idyllic I have ever spent outdoors. Of course, that alone cannot qualify me as a real bass fisherman, either. I carved a lot of my own lures in those days, and even invented my own spinnerbaits (before such a word was heard in the tackle shops), and caught a good many fish on them, too. I concede, however, that since those homemade baits had not been blessed by even one touring pro on the bass-tournament circuit, it's not very likely that they could have been any good.

About that time, Uncle Sam decided he wanted ME, and I found out they don't have largemouth bass in Korea. Two years later, I had hardly got my uniform off before I headed for the Piney Woods and Wolf Creek, Sandy Creek, and Village and Peach and all the rest... only to find that a terrible thing had happened while I was gone. The rising pools of a couple of the giant impoundments in East Texas had drowned some of the creeks and backed the others up, slowing their currents and letting them silt up. What had been winding, amber reaches and riffles between deep golden-green pools were now sluggish mudholes. I cursed the Corps of Engineers and never went back.

ON THOSE broad reservoirs, which had destroyed my creeks, the real bass fishermen were beginning to appear—and they still abound. You can see the sure marks—the roostertails behind the giant engines, the pedestal seats, and the electric trolling motors. There are decals on the bows and sometimes on the big outboards. And the jumpsuits! Always those purple or orange jumpsuits...

My loss was their gain, theirs and their robot boats, blinking and flashing and humming and reporting, like R2-D2, depth, structure (Oh, my God! "Structure"!), dissolved oxygen, pH,

and temperature at three different depths. And they took my sport away from me.

They didn't know that, of course, and never intended it, any more than the Corps intended to clog Wolf Creek with mud and longnose gars. It was progress, the fashion, the largemouth elevated to the status of the aristocratic trout, the democratization of scientific angling. It was I who was out of step.

Well, it does go to show the truth of what I said in the beginning—I can't be classed as a *real* bass fisherman in the first place.

THERE was still the Gulf of Mexico and the bays, close at hand, and I turned my back on the big lakes. I sought and fought blue and white marlin, wahoo, sailfish, tarpon, cobia, king mackerel, dolphin, spotted seatrout, channel bass, and more. I tried it all. I bought a 30-foot, air-conditioned cabin cruiser with more gadgets on the bridge than the space shuttle. I caught so many king mackerel that I got burned out.

Then I sold the cruiser and got a beautiful 20-foot console outboard with twin engines, and settled down to wade-fishing the shallow flats of the estuaries, casting a tiny gold spoon for redfish (as channel bass are called hereabouts), and it was fine, stalking sighted fish, casting precisely, presenting the lure exactly right, and slugging it out with the reds on light tackle in clear water.

Something like my memories of Wolf Creek, only to the tenth power.

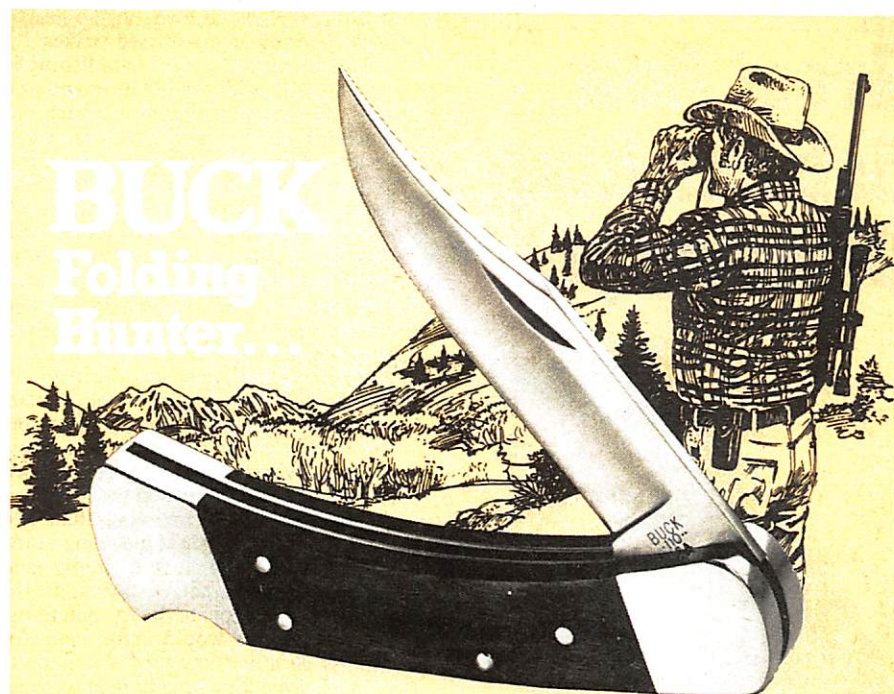
Sometimes I could entice big specks (the local name for spotted weakfish) to come up out of 5 or 6 feet of clear water to sock a surface plug, and every single one of them that ever did that for me is etched in my mental files as though on cut glass, sparkling in the morning sun!

And then, almost overnight it seemed, they took that away from me, too. This time it was outlaw netters, commercial fishermen who laughed at the laws, knowing that the bays are too big and the wardens too few—and besides, the judges didn't care. Every season I found fewer and fewer fish.

Finally, it just wasn't worth it. I sold the boat and the lot at Port O'Connor and the travel trailer, and speculated on the rewards of needlework, birdwatching, and growing orchids.

It was at about that time, by chance, that I acquired a piece of land on which there is a lake, in which there are largemouth black bass. I had not opened my freshwater tackle box for more than twenty years, but, fishingwise, that lake looked like the only game in my part of town.

I bought a couple of open-faced spinning reels and fitted them to some of my light saltwater rods and loaded the little one with 4-pound-test and the bigger one with 6-pound monofilament. While I was in the store, I looked at the lure racks, and found they don't sell *real* bass lures anymore. There were Big O's and Little A's and Middle-Sized Z's. There were plastic worms and grubs and slugs and lizards and snakes and salamanders and a couple of creatures I might be afraid of meeting in a lonely place.



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I remembered that 99 cents was a pretty stiff price to pay for a bass plug, but most of these now went for \$3 or \$4. That's *each*, not per six-pack! Mainly it seemed that surface lures were passé, and deep-runners in. The salesman called them "crankbaits," which annoyed me for two reasons. One was that I wasn't sure what "crankbait" means, and resented not knowing, and, second, the term sounded pretty silly to a man who knows no other way to retrieve any kind of lure than to crank it in, and had been doing that for about forty-five years. I got miffed and didn't buy anything.

I went home and opened my tackle box and began digging around for the old plugs and lures, shaking the tangled

hooks loose, scratching off the melted rubber skirts, and rubbing up the faded paint with a thumb. Every chipped, dulled, rusty-hooked plug that was lifted out of the tangle brought back a picture. The little green River Runt Spook was Wolf Creek, murmuring to itself in the late-afternoon sunshafts through the pines. The Lucky 13 was my tall grandfather with his thumb stuck down the throat of a 2-pounder, holding the fish up for me to see and laughing. The Bass-Oreno? Of course, the little Bass-Oreno was the caretaker looking hard at me and saying, "You sure, kid?" And there were hundreds and hundreds of other moments and smells and sounds—the liquid slash of a bass at a Jitterbug

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at dusk, the barred owls on the nearby bank, hooting at my missed strikes. . . .

To hell with it! I went bass fishing in my new lake, with the old lures and new reels. It took a while to get back the touch for slipping a plug into the water beside a "stawb" without sounding like I was pitching horseshoes. It would have been embarrassing if a real bass fisherman had been there to see my awkwardness. But it came back. I had to stop and try to remember the rod-tip movements that make a tiny Rapala crawl and writhe on the surface, but that slowly returned, too.

What wasn't there was the reflexive memory of the quickness of a bass' strike. The saltwater fish I'd spent the last twenty years with hit a lure like a diesel 18-wheeler, and they're not hard to hook. The first strike on the Rapala—the first bass strike in more than two decades—sort of caught me going in the other direction. I jerked wildly and missed, then sat there staring at the ripples, mouth open, heart pounding, hoping the fish would come back for another shot and knowing it wouldn't.

I reeled the little plug back and closed my mouth and took a deep breath and shot the Rapala out to a different "stawb." This time I kept the line taut and stayed ready. . . . and there was no strike, of course. Finally, after a half hour, I got the rhythm and began to cast and work the plug more effortlessly, relaxing. It's like riding a bicycle, I told myself, once you learn how. . . .

The second strike was a rollover, the fish taking on the way down, and I lifted the tip and put the hook in as smoothly as ever I had with a redfish on the Matagorda flats, and my fish jumped.

Giving different lures a try

(Continued from page 93)

making long trips into the Rockies after trout. The best lures I've ever found, especially for consistently taking out-sized cutthroats, are plugs meant chiefly for warm-water fish, such as the Flatfish. I'm convinced the basic reason is that these large trout are predominantly feeders upon good-sized forage fish. These lures are designed to wriggle furiously while moving slowly, thus appearing easy to "catch."

Many enormous browns are caught nowadays in Western lakes by trolling or casting the realistic minnow-simulating plugs. It should be noted, too, that the clan of so-called "bull trout" fishermen in Montana, avid fans of Dolly Varden from 5 to 25 pounds, for years used a secret lure that seemed irresistible to monster bulls. It was a large, brightly colored plug with a fluted head that gave it action and gurgle. While orthodox trout anglers snorted at the idea, bull trout anglers mopped up.

I once asked Dave Thompson, bull trout expert at Apgar, Montana, where the idea for that eminently successful trout plug had originated. No one, he told me, seemed to know. But obviously somebody had dared to cross over to a

Maybe a 2-pounder. I couldn't have cared less. I was thirteen all over again and greatly taken with this creature with whom I was engaged. He came in at last, a glowing, chunky bass with a small head for his burly shoulders. I held him up in the hot, still air and turned him so the setting sun glistened from his shining, green-and-black armor, and slipped him back into the lake.

Then I dug into the box and tied on the ancient wooden Punkinseed and shot it out and worked it the same way I had the Rapala, and had it taken cleanly as I pulled it under the third time. It happened again and again as the sky turned darker and the nighthawks flitted and tipped and dipped to sip from the surface of the lake. In something very much like rapture, I tried plug after plug, often changing immediately after having released another fish. Every cast became a celebration, a salute to someone or someone. Who said you can't go home again? He was wrong, about bass, anyway.

The fish were just as I remembered them. Nothing had changed. I knew these lures and these fish, and how to make a surface lure talk to them as well as I ever had known on Wolf Creek. It turned out that nobody had taken my sport away from me after all. They'd tried to hide it under a camouflage of stickers and patches and decals and uniforms, funny names on funny lures and blinking digitals on fast boats on big water, but they hadn't really taken it away.

And, before dark, I knew that nobody ever could as long as I can resist the temptation to try to become a *real* bass fisherman.



non-trout lure. Similarly, an "impure" trout friend of mine from Wyoming caught a big rainbow several years ago that had its gullet stuffed with good-sized crayfish. It is certainly not unknown that big trout often eat crayfish. But this man took a gamble sparked by what that trout's stomach divulged. Last year he began trying one of the bottom-bumping crayfish plugs so popular with bass and walleye fishermen. He told me in a recent letter that these lures had to date accounted for ten trout, all over 6 pounds.

An interesting lure switch being tried by a scattering of largemouth bass enthusiasts after wall-hanger trophies concerns the use of lures of preposterous size. Years ago I fished with a Florida native who used a cane pole and live shiners 10 or 12 inches long to catch big bass. When he gathered the bait I simply didn't believe it. But when I saw him put several 8- to 10-pound bass into the boat I was converted. Numerous magazine articles have appeared over the past several seasons about this very practice—big baitfish for big bass.

In the meantime, several scientific studies about the feeding habits of large-