



**HAIRY GERTZ AND THE 47 CRAPPIES** *one of life's yeastier experiences is to fish in that rich mulligatawny stew of dead toads, garter snakes and number-ten oil known as cedar lake*

**memoir** By JEAN SHEPHERD

LIFE, WHEN YOU'RE a male kid, is what the grownups are doing. The adult world seems to be some kind of secret society that has its own passwords, hand-clasps and countersigns. The thing is to get in. But there's this invisible, impenetrable wall between you and all the great, unimaginably swinging things that they seem to be involved in. Occasionally, mutterings of exotic secrets and incredible pleasures filter through. And so you bang against it, throw rocks at it, try to climb over it, burrow under it; but there it is. Impenetrable. Enigmatic.

Girls, somehow, seem to be already *with it*, as though from birth they've got the word; Lolita has no male counterpart. But the rest of us have to claw our way into life as best we can, never knowing when we'll be admitted. It

happens to each of us in different ways—and once it does, there's no turning back.

It happened to me at the age of 12 in northern Indiana—a remarkably barren terrain resembling in some ways the surface of the moon, encrusted with steel mills, oil refineries and honky-tonk bars. I was hung up on fishing at the time. Some kids got hung up on kite flying, others on pool playing. I became the greatest vicarious angler in the history of the Western world.

There just wasn't any actual fishing to be done around where I lived. So I would stand for hours in front of the goldfish tank at Woolworth's, landing fantails in my mind, after incredible struggles. And I would read *Field and Stream*, *Outdoor Life* and *Sports Afield* the way other kids read *G-S* and *His*

*Battle Aces*. I would break out in a cold sweat reading about these guys portaging to Alaska and landing rare salmon; and about guys climbing the High Sierras to do mortal battle with golden trout; and about craggy, sinewy sportsmen who discover untouched bass lakes where they have to beat off the pickerel with an oar, and the saber-toothed, raging 25-pound smallmouths chase them ashore and right up into the woods.

After reading one of these fantasies, I would walk around in a daze for hours, feeling the cork pistol grip of my imaginary trusty six-foot split-bamboo bait-casting rod in my right hand and hearing the high-pitched scream of my Pflueger Supreme reel straining to hold a 17-pound great northern in check.

I became known around town as "the kid-who-is-  
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HAIRY GERTZ *(continued from page 117)*

the nut-on-fishing." I even went to the extent of learning how to tie flies, though I'd never been fly casting in my life. No one had ever even *seen* a fly in my neighborhood. I read books on the subject. And in my bedroom, while the other kids are making balsa models of Curtiss Robins, I am busy tying silver doctors, royal coachmen and black gnats. They were terrible. I would try one out in the bathtub to see whether it made a ripple that might frighten off the wily rainbow.

"Glouk."

Down to the bottom like a rock went my floating dry fly. I never could figure out the business of dressing flies, but it didn't matter. I tied them on hardware-store catfish hooks instead of those little, thin, blue-steel barbs with the long shank they showed in the articles entitled "The Art of Dry-Fly Tying."

Fishing was part of the mysterious, unattainable adult world. And I wanted in.

My old man was what you might call an Indiana once-in-a-while fisherman-and-beer-party-goer: they are the same thing in the shadow of the blast furnaces. I didn't know then that there are people who fish and there are people who go fishing; they're two entirely different creatures. My old man did not drive 1500 miles to the Atlantic shore carrying 5000 pounds of Abercrombie & Fitch fishing tackle, to surf cast for stripers. He was the kind who would go fishing—once a month or so during the summer, when all of the guys down at the office would get the itch. The bowling season was over, and somehow they had to bust out. Fishing was a way of doing it—a way of drinking a lot of beer and yelling and telling dirty stories—and getting away from the women. To me, it was a sacred thing: They were going fishing.

Anyway, he and these guys from the office would get together and go down to one of the few lakes near where we lived—but never to Lake Michigan, which was exactly one mile away. I don't know why; I guess it was too big and awesome. In any case, nobody ever really thought of fishing in it. At least nobody in my father's mob. They went mostly to a picturesque mudhole known as Cedar Lake.

I will have to describe to you what a lake in the summer in northern Indiana is like. To begin with, heat, in Indiana, is something else again. It descends like a 300-pound fat lady settling on a picnic bench in the middle of July. It can literally be sliced into chunks and stored away in the basement to use in winter; on cold days you just bring it out and turn it on. Indiana heat is not a meteorological phenomenon—it is a solid element, something you can grab by the

handles. Almost every day in the summer the whole town is just shimmering in front of you. You'd look across the street and skinny people would be all fat and wiggly like in the fun-house mirrors at Coney Island. The asphalt in the streets would bubble and hiss like a pot of steaming Rabston.

That kind of heat and sun produces mirages. All it takes is good flat country, a nutty sun and insane heat and, by George, you're looking at Cleveland 200 miles away. I remember many times standing out in center field on an open-hearth day in mid-August, the prairie stretching out endlessly in all directions, and way out past the swamp would be this kind of tenuous, shadowy, cloudlike thing shimmering just above the horizon. It would be the Chicago skyline, upside down, just hanging there in the sky. And after a while it would gradually disappear.

So, naturally, fishing is different in Indiana. The muddy lakes, about May, when the sun starts beating down on them, would begin to simmer and bubble quietly around the edges. These lakes are not fed by springs or streams. I don't know what feeds them. Maybe seepage. Nothing but weeds and truck axles on the bottom; flat, low, muddy banks, surrounded by cottonwood trees, cattails, smelly marshes and old dumps. Archetypal dumps. Dumps gravitate to Indiana lakes like flies to a hog killing. Way down at the end where the water is shallow and soupy are the old cars and the ashes, busted refrigerators, oil drums, old corsets and God knows what else.

At the other end of the lake is the roller rink. There's *always* a roller rink. You can hear that old electric organ going, playing *Heartaches*, and you can hear the sound of the roller skates:

"Shhhhhh . . . shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh . . . shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh . . ."

And the fistfights breaking out. The roller-rink nut in heat. The roller-rink nut was an earlier incarnation of the drive-in-movie nut. He was the kind who was very big with stainless-steel diners, motels, horror films and frozen egg rolls. A close cousin to the motorcycle clod, he went ape for chicks with purple eyelids. You know the crowd. Crewcuts, low foreheads, rumbles, hollering, belching, drinking beer, roller skating on one foot, wearing black-satin jackets with *SOUTHWEST A. C.* lettered in white on the back around a white-winged roller-skated foot. The kind that hangs the stuff in the back windows of their '53 Mercurys: a huge pair of foam-rubber dice, a skull and crossbones, hula-hula dolls, and football players—pro, of course—with heads that bob up and down. The guys with ball fringe around

the windows of their cars, with phony Venetian blinds in the back, and big white-rubber mudguards hanging down, with red reflectors. Or they'll take some old heap and line it with plastic imitation mink fur, pad the steering wheel with leopard skin and ostrich feathers until it weighs 17 pounds and is as fat as a safari. A TV set, a bar and a folding Castro bed are in the trunk, automatically operated and all lined with tasteful Sears, Roebuck ermine. You know the crew—a true American product. We turn them out like Campbell's Pork and Beans.

Well, this is the system of aesthetics that brought the roller rink to Cedar Lake, Indiana, when I was a kid.

About 150 yards from the roller rink was the Cedar Lake Evening in Paris Dance Hall. Festering and steamy and thronged with yeasty refugees from the roller rink. These are the guys who can't skate. But they can do other things. They're down there jostling back and forth in 400-percent humidity to the incomparable sounds of an Indiana dance-hall band. Twelve nonunion cretinous musicians—Mickey Schwartz' Moonlight Serenaders—blowing *Red Sails in the Sunset* on Montgomery Ward altos. The lighting is a tasteful combination of naked light bulbs, red and blue crepe paper, orange cellophane gels and, of course, an illuminated bass drum featuring an artistic rendering of a Hawaiian waterfall, the water actually moving as it tumbles into a chartreuse ocean.

In between the roller rink and the dance hall are 17 small shacks known as beer halls, which also sell night crawlers. And surrounding this tiny oasis of civilization, this bastion of bonhomie, is a gigantic sea of total darkness, absolute pitch-black Stygian darkness, around this tiny island of totally decadent, bucolic American merriment. The roller skates are hissing, the beer bottles are crashing, the chicks are squealing. Mickey's reed men are bearing down hard on *When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano*, and life is full.

And in the middle of the lake, several feet away, are over 17,000 fishermen, in wooden rowboats rented at a buck and a half an hour. It is two A.M. The temperature is 175, with humidity to match. And the smell of decayed toads, the dumps at the far end of the lake, and an occasional soupçon of Standard Oil, whose refinery is a couple of miles away, is enough to put hair on the back of a mud turtle. Seventeen thousand guys clumped together in the middle, fishing for the known 64 crappies in that lake.

Crappies are a special kind of Midwestern fish, created by God for the express purpose of surviving in waters that would kill a hubonic plague bacillus.

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They have never been known to fight, or  
even faintly struggle. I guess when  
you're a crappie, you figure it's no use  
anyway. One thing is as bad as another.  
They're just down there, in the soup. No  
one quite knows what they eat, if any-  
thing, but everybody's fishing for them.  
At two o'clock in the morning.

Each boat contains a minimum of  
nine guys and fourteen cases of beer.  
And once in a while, in the darkness, is  
heard the sound of a guy falling over  
backward into the slime: "SSGLUNK."

"Oh! Ah! Help, help!" A piteous  
cry in the darkness. Another voice:

"Hey, for God's sake, Charlie's fallen  
in again! Grab the oar!"

And then it slowly dies down. Charlie  
is hauled out of the goo and is lying on  
the bottom of the boat, urping up dead  
lizards and Atlas Prager. Peace reigns  
again.

The water in these lakes is not the  
water you know about. It is composed of  
roughly 10 percent waste glop spewed  
out by Shell, Sinclair, Phillips and the  
Grasselli Chemical Company; 12 percent  
used detergent; 35 percent thick gruel  
composed of decayed garter snakes, de-  
ceased toads, fermenting crappies and a  
kind of syrupy magma that holds it all  
together. No one is quite sure what it is,  
because everybody is afraid to admit  
what it really is. They don't want to  
look at it too closely.

So this mélange lays there under the  
sun, and about August it is slowly sim-  
mering like a rich mulligatawny stew. At  
two in the morning you can hear the  
water next to the boat in the darkness:

"Ghump . . . Bluumump." Big bub-  
bles of some unclassified gas come up  
from the bottom and burst. The natives,  
in their superstitious way, believe that it  
is highly inflammable. They take no  
chances.

The saddest thing of all is that on  
these lakes there are usually about 19  
summer cottages to the square foot,  
each equipped with a large motorboat.  
The sound of a 40-horsepower Evinrude  
going through a sea of number-ten oil  
has to be heard to be understood.

"RRRRRAAAAAAHHHHHHWW-  
WWWWWWWRRRRRRRRR!"

The prow is sort of porting the stuff,  
slowly stirring it into a sluggish, viscous  
wake.

Natives actually swim in this water. Of  
course, it is impossible to swim near the  
shore, because the shore is one great big  
sea of mud that goes all the way down to  
the core of the earth. There are stories  
of whole towns being swallowed up and  
stored in the middle of the earth. So the  
native rows out to the middle of the lake  
and hurls himself off the back seat of his  
rowboat.

"Ghup!"

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ous for swimming. You don't sink. You just bounce a little and float there. You literally have to hit your head on the surface of these lakes to get under a few inches. Once you do, you come up streaming mosquito eggs, dead toads—an Indiana specialty—and all sorts of things that are the offshoots of various exotic merriments that occur outside the roller rink.

The bottom of the lake is a solid carpet of old beer cans. The beer cans are at least a thousand feet deep in certain places.

And so 17,000 fishermen gather in one knot, because it is rumored that here is where the deep hole is. All Indiana lakes have a deep hole, into which, as the myth goes, the fish retire in the hot weather. Which is always.

Every month or so an announcement would be made by my old man, usually on a Friday night, after work.

"I'm getting up early tomorrow morning. I'm going fishing."

Getting up early and going fishing with Hairy Gertz and the crowd meant getting out of the house about three o'clock in the afternoon, roughly. Gertz was a key member of the party. He owned the Coleman lamp. It was part of the folklore that if you had a bright lantern in your boat the fish could not resist it. The idea was to hold the lantern out over the water and the fish would have to come over to see what was going on. Of course, when the fish arrived, there would be your irresistible worm, and that would be it.

Well, these Coleman lamps may not have drawn fish, but they worked great on mosquitoes. One of the more yeasty experiences in life is to occupy a tiny rented rowboat with eight other guys, knee-deep in beer cans, with a blinding

Coleman lamp hanging out of the boat, at two A.M., with the lamp hissing like Fu Manchu about to strike—"zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz"—and every mosquito in the Western Hemisphere descending on you in the middle of Cedar Lake. They love Coleman lamps. In the light they shed, the mosquitoes swarm like rain. And in the darkness all around there'd be other lights, in other boats, and once in a while a face would float above one. Everyone is coated with an inch and a half of something called citronella, reputedly a mosquito repellent but actually a sort of mosquito salad dressing.

The water is absolutely flat. There has not been a breath of air since April. It is now August. The surface is one flat sheet of old used oil lying in the darkness, with the sounds of the roller rink floating out over it, mingling with the angry drone of the mosquitoes and muffled swearing from the other boats. A fistfight breaks out at the Evening in Paris. The sound of sirens can be heard faintly in the Indiana blackness. It gets louder and then fades away. Tiny orange lights bob over the dance floor.

"Raahhhhd sails in the sawwwwnnn-schhhht . . ." It's the drummer who's singing. He figures someday Ted Weems will hear him.

". . . Haaaahhhhhwwww brightlyyy they shiiiiine . . ." There is nothing like a band vocalist in a rotten, struggling mickey band. When you've heard him over 2000 yards of soupy, oily water, filtered through 14 billion feeding mosquitoes in the August heat, he is particularly juicy and ripe. He is overloading the 10-watt Allied Radio Knight amplifier by at least 400 percent, the gain turned all the way up, his chrome-plated bullet-shaped crystal mike on the edge of feedback.

"Raahhhhd sails in the sawwwwnnn-schhhht . . ."

It is the sound of the American night. And to a 12-year-old kid it is exciting beyond belief.

Then my old man, out of the blue, says to me, "You know, if you're gonna come along, you got to clean the fish."

Gonna come along! My God! I wanted to go fishing more than anything else in the world, and my old man wanted to drink beer more than anything else in the world, and so did Gertz and the gang, and more than even *that*, they wanted to get away from all the women. They wanted to get out on the lake and tell dirty stories and drink beer and get eaten by mosquitoes; just sit out there and sweat and be *men*. They wanted to get away from work, the car payments, the lawn, the mill, and everything else.

And so here I am, in the dark, in a rowboat, with the men. I am half-blind with sleepiness. I am used to going to bed at nine-thirty or ten o'clock, and here it is two, three o'clock in the morning. I'm squatting in the back end of the boat, with 87,000,000 mosquitoes swarming over me, but I am *fishing!* I am out of my skull with fantastic excitement, hanging onto my pole.

In those days, in Indiana, they fished with gigantic cane poles. They knew not from spinning. A cane pole is a long bamboo pole that's maybe 12 or 15 feet in length, it weighs a ton, and tied to the end of it is about 30 feet of thick green line, roughly half the weight of the average clothesline, three big lead sinkers, a couple of crappie hooks, and a bobber.

One of sport's most exciting moments is when three Indiana fishermen in the same boat simultaneously and without consulting one another decide to pull their lines out of the water and recast. In total darkness. First the pole, rising like a huge whip: "Whooooooo-oooooooop." Then the lines, whirling overhead: "Whooooooooooooooo." And then: "Oh! FOR CHRIST SAKE! WHAT THE HELL?" "CLUNK! CLONK!"

Sound of cane poles banging together, and lead weights landing in the boat. And such brilliant swearing as you have never heard. Yelling, hoistering, with somebody always getting a hook stuck in the back of his ear. And, of course, all in complete darkness, the Coleman lamp at the other end of the rowboat barely penetrating a circle of three or four feet.

"Hey, for God's sake, Gertz, willya tell me when you're gonna pull your pole up!? Oh, Jesus Christ, look at this mess!"

There is nothing worse than trying to untangle seven cane poles, 200 feet of soggy green line, just as the fish are starting to bite in the other boats. Sound carries over water:

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YOU,  
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"Shhhh. I got a bite!"

The fishermen with the tangled lines become frenzied. Fingernails are torn, hooks dig deeper into thumbs, and kids huddle terrified out of range in the darkness.

You have been sitting for 20 hours, and nothing. A bobber just barely visible in the dark water is one of the most beautiful sights known to man. It's not doing anything, but there's always the feeling that at any instant it might. It just lays out there in the darkness. A luminous bobber, a beautiful thing, with a long, thin quill and a tiny red-and-white float, with just the suggestion of a line reaching into the black water. These are special bobbers for very tiny fish.

I have been watching my bobber so hard and so long in the darkness that I am almost hypnotized. I have not had a bite—ever—but the excitement of being there is enough for me, a kind of delirious joy that has nothing to do with sex or any of the more obvious pleasures. To this day, when I hear some guy singing in that special drummer's voice, it comes over me. It's two o'clock in the morning again. I'm a kid, I'm tired. I'm excited. I'm having the time of my life.

And at the other end of the lake:  
"Raaahhhhh sails in the sawwwwnn-schhhht . . ."

The roller rink drones on, and the mosquitoes are humming. The Coleman lamp sputters, and we're all sitting together in our little boat.

Not really together, since I am a kid, and they are men, but at least I'm there. Gertz is stewed to the ears. He is down at the other end. He has this fantastic collection of rotten stories, and early in the evening my old man keeps saying:

"There's a kid with us, you know."

But by two in the morning all of them have had enough so that it doesn't matter. They're telling stories, and I don't care. I'm just sitting there, clinging to my cane pole when, by God, I get a nibble!

I don't believe it. The bobber straightens up, jiggles, dips, and comes to rest in the gloom. I whisper:

"I got a bite!" The storytellers look up from their beer cans in the darkness.

"Wha . . . ? Hey, whazzat?"

"Shhhh! Be quiet!"

We sit in silence, everybody watching his bobber through the haze of insects. The drummer is singing in the distance. We hang suspended for long minutes. Then suddenly all the bobbers dip and go under. The crappies are hitting!

You never saw anything like it! We are pulling up fish as fast as we can get them off the hooks. Crappies are flying into the boat, one after the other, and hopping around on the bottom in the darkness, amid the empty beer cans. Within 20 minutes we have landed 47 fish. We are knee-deep in crappies. The jackpot!

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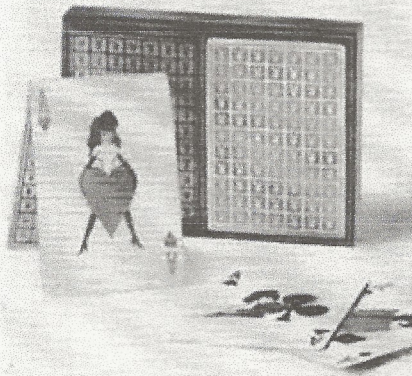
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Well, the old man just goes wild. They are all yelling and screaming and pulling the fish in—while all the other boats around us are being skunked. The fish have come out of their hole or whatever it is that they're in at the bottom of the lake, the beer cans and the old tires, and have decided to eat.

You can hear the rest of the boats pulling up anchors and rowing over, frantically. They are thumping against us. There's a big, solid phalanx of wooden boats around us. You could walk from one boat to the other for miles around. And still they are skunked. We are catching the fish!

By three A.M. they've finally stopped biting, and an hour later we are back on land. I'm falling asleep in the rear seat between Gertz and Zudock. We're driving home in the dawn, and the men are hollering, drinking, throwing beer cans out on the road and having a great time.

We are back at the house, and my father says to me as we are coming out of the garage with Gertz and the rest of them:

"And now Jean's gonna clean the fish. Let's go in the house and have something to eat. Clean 'em on the back porch, will ya, kid?"

Into the house they go. The lights go on in the kitchen; they sit down and start eating sandwiches and making coffee. And I am out on the back porch with 47 live, flopping crappies.

They are well named. Fish that are taken out of muddy, rotten, lousy, stinking lakes are muddy, rotten, lousy, stinking fish. It is as simple as that. And they are made out of some kind of hard rubber.

I get my scout knife and go to work. Fifteen minutes and 21 crappies later I am sick over the side of the porch. But I do not stop. It is part of fishing.

By now nine neighborhood cats and a raccoon have joined me on the porch, and we are all working together. The August heat, now that we are away from the lake, is even hotter. The uproar in the kitchen is getting louder and louder. There is nothing like a motley collection of Indiana officeworkers who have just successfully defeated nature and have brought home the kill. Like cave men of old they celebrate around the campfire with song and drink. And belching.

I have now finished the last crappie and am wrapping the clean fish in the editorial page of the *Chicago Tribune*. It has a very tough paper that doesn't leak. Especially the editorial page.

The old man hollers out: "How you doing? Come on in and have a Nehi."

I enter the kitchen, blinded by that big yellow light bulb, weighted down with a load of five-and-a-half-inch crappies, covered with fish scales and blood, and smelling like the far end of Cedar Lake. There are worms under my finger-

nails from biting hooks all night, and I am feeling at least nine feet tall. I spread the fish out on the sink, and old Hairy Gertz says:

"My God! Look at those speckled beauties!"—an expression he had picked up from *Outdoor Life*.

The old man hands me a two-pound liverwurst sandwich and a bottle of Nehi orange. Gertz is now rolling strongly, as are the other eight file clerks, all smelly, and mosquito-bitten, eyes red-rimmed from the Coleman lamp, covered with worms and with the drippings of at least 15 beers apiece. Gertz hollers:

"Ya know, lookin' at those fish reminds me of a story."

He is about to uncork his cruddiest joke of the night. They all lean forward over the white-enamel kitchen table with the chipped edges, over the salami and the beer bottles, the rye bread and the mustard. And Gertz digs deep into his vast file of obscenity.

"There was this guy one time who was sellin' Fuller brushes door to door, and this dame comes to the door . . ."

At first I am holding back, since I am a kid. The old man says:

"Hold it down, Gertz. You'll wake up the wife and she'll raise hell."

He is referring to my mother.

Gertz lowers his voice and they all scrunch their chairs forward amid a great cloud of cigar smoke. There is only one thing to do. I scrunch forward, too, and stick my head into the huddle, right next to the old man, into the circle of leering, snickering, fishy-smelling faces. Of course, I do not even remotely comprehend the gist of the story. But I know that it is rotten to the core.

Gertz belts out the punch line; the crowd bellows and beats on the table. They begin uncapping more Blatz.

Secretly, suddenly, and for the first time, I realize that I am in. The Eskimo Pies and Nehi oranges are all behind me, and a whole new world is stretching out endlessly and wildly in all directions before me. I have gotten the call!

Suddenly my mother is in the doorway in her Chinese-red chenille bathrobe. Ten minutes later I am in the sack, and out in the kitchen Gertz is telling another one. The bottles are rattling, and the file clerks are hunkered around the fire celebrating their primal victory over the elements.

Somewhere off in the dark the Monon Louisville Limited wails as it snakes through the Gibson Hump on its way to the outside world. The giant Indiana moths, at least five pounds apiece, are banging against the window screens next to my bed. The cats are fighting in the back yard over crappie heads, and fish scales are itching in my hair as I joyfully, ecstatically slide off into the great world beyond.