

# The Biggest Fish

## (A Partly True Story)

Bruce Tracy

The morning was gray and the fields were covered by a low fog that was just starting to lift. George stared out the window as he pulled on his work boot. There was little chance of getting any farming in today with the rain already sending a precursor in the form of a light drizzle. He started to pull on his second boot, but this time much more slowly due to his sore left ankle and then quietly worked his way to the kitchen so as to not wake anyone. No matter how early he got up, his mother was already in the kitchen working on breakfast.

“That ankle still sore?” she asked as he limped into the kitchen. She looked up as he entered and then returned her attention to the four biscuits on the sink that she would have to stretch seven ways when the rest of the kids finally got up. Without a father around, things were even tougher and George was feeling the pressure of keeping his family afloat. Thankfully the Georgia earth was still pushing up crops, but the weather wasn’t helping out much.

“It’s alright,” he stared hard at the biscuits but figured he could hold out a little longer. His younger brothers and sisters would need them more. He looked around the kitchen for a decent substitute and settled for a carrot before walking to the door for a better look at his field. It was far too wet to plow, but the gray was starting to fade and the afternoon still held some hope. “I’m gonna fish a little this morning.” His voice was no longer the voice of a child. The Depression was taking its toll on everyone, but the added weight of filling in for his father this last year had made it even tougher for him. President Hoover’s promise of “a chicken in every pot” had somehow not reached his farm yet.

“I am going to see if Jack is out there. A little rain is all the excuse he needs to go to the lake. If we are lucky, we can catch us something for lunch.”

His momma didn’t look up as she started cutting the biscuits down to size. A slight nod was her response. She didn’t begrudge him his occasional trip to the lake; he worked hard enough, and a fish or two would go a long way. “Just don’t bring me back

one of them nasty lake bass.” She had picked the carrot up off of the sink and was washing it off. “Trout make better eatin’.”

Jack was sitting with his back against the boat. He wasn't lazy, but he also didn't have the sole responsibility of his own farm. Leisure was much easier for him and a morning of lying in the emerging sun followed by paddling around the lake in search of fish suited him just fine. George hadn't arrived yet, but he knew he would. Sitting around staring at a field that couldn't be plowed wasn't his style either. After all, he was still nineteen no matter what responsibilities had fallen on him, and a morning of fishing was still a morning of fishing. Sure enough, George showed up just as the sun was making its first appearance of the day.

“Figures.” He kept walking past Jack to the boat that he had made out of leftover lumber from around his farm. He started dragging it down to the water before Jack had a chance to get his back off of it. “I take the morning off to come fish with the likes of you and the sun comes out.”

“I have that effect,” Jack smiled. “Even the sun shines brighter when I'm around.” He jumped to his feet and helped pull the boat the rest of the way. “When I catch my fish this morning, I might just be willing to share it with you. Any big plans for your half?”

“Of the monster you're gonna catch? I dunno, maybe use it as bait.”

“What took you this morning? You better not have tried to plow that field of yours.” By now the boat was floating, but was already taking on water as they loaded in the only pole they had between the two of them. The boat was leakier than one of Jack's fishing stories.

“Naw. I stopped by your place for some breakfast before heading over here. Your mama gave me your lunch as well. She always did like me better than you.” The corner of his lips turned up in a quick smile but he recovered in time to keep it hidden.

With just the one pole in the boat, they had to take turns using it. It belonged to Jack, so he fished it first. The morning was now warm and a slow breeze made the leaves on the trees near the lake shimmy just a little. It was the sound of summer, and even if no fish were caught, this was still the place to be. He pulled a box from his front pocket and retrieved the only lure that they had to use that day. Jack had been given a natural scale

Fintail Shiner from the Creek Chub Bait Co. for his eighteenth birthday, and the two of them had yet to lose it in the five months since. More than once, though, one of them had to jump in the lake to pull it off of the bottom. The morning had turned into something good and George was starting to feel a little guilty as he imagined his fields drying out in the sun, waiting to be plowed. He would kick off fishing a little early and get back in time for a half-day's work.

Jack cast out into the dark water and brought the shiner back in slowly. He tried bringing it in at various speeds, but there was no luck in it this morning. After his tenth cast, he tossed his pole over to George and reached over for the oars. "Where to?" he asked as he turned the boat back out toward the middle. Montgomery Lake was mainly a wide side channel of the Ocmulgee River, and it didn't take much to paddle completely across it. Part of the year the lake was little more than a stream itself, but when there was enough run-off from the river, it turned itself into an honest to goodness lake just wide enough to get you a little tired if you had to swim across it.

"There," George's eyes fixed on a pocket between two fallen trees on the opposite shore. Fish loved cover and when the day started heating up as this one was starting to, they would move into the protective shade of a submerged tree or some underwater weeds. Jack paddled close, but not too close. There was no need in spooking anything that might be hiding in there. George squinted his eyes trying to find the perfect spot to cast and then let the lure fly. The water was sin black and as soon as the Shiner hit the surface, the water exploded. It was as if a kid had just let loose from the bank and did a cannonball jump right next to where the lure had once been, only there was no kid, and the lure was nowhere to be seen. Whatever monster had taken the Shiner, it had dived deep and taken the lure with it.

"What was that!" Jack hollered as he jumped to his feet and almost upturned the boat. "That's either one huge fish or a milk cow just jumped in the water and grabbed our lure." He was still screaming but he managed to sit back down before the boat flipped.

"It's huge," George said breathlessly as he held on to the pole with both hands fearing that whatever it was, it was about to rip the pole free. "I think it might be your sister." Then the pulling stopped. George tried bringing in some of the line, but it wouldn't budge.

“Well that’s the end of it.” George continued pulling on the line, but it wasn’t giving at all. “That fish just wrapped us around a log.” Losing the fish was bad, but knowing that one of them would have to jump in the lake to pull their only lure off of a log was even worse. “I’ll hold the pole and you go ahead and jump in there and unstick us.”

Before Jack could start a protest, the line started moving away from them. George’s heart jumped into his throat ... something strong was on the other end of the line. As the fish started to move toward the boat, George brought in as much line as he could and when he felt the pressure of the fish start to move away, he slowed his retrieval. It was like pulling a bowling ball out of the water.

There wasn’t much fight in this monster fish but when it was about five feet out, it made one last attempt at an escape. Half of its body cleared the water and when it went back in, it made a splash that sprayed their faces. He finally pulled the fish to the side of the boat and it took both of them to drag it over the edge. It was huge. “It ain’t your sister,” George was completely out of breath and couldn’t take his eyes off of the fish. “It’s much better looking.”

Together they were able to carry the fish from the lake out to the road and then sat down to plan their next move. The fish rested across both of their laps and looking down into its face, George could see the gills still moving and an unblinking eye looking up at him. She was an absolute beauty.

“Now what?” George wanted to get the fish home to his family, but the thing weighed a ton and he wasn’t yet ready to carry it the rest of the way.

“We wait.”

“Can’t wait all day.”

“It’s ten thirty.” Jack was looking at his watch and then back down the road. “We won’t have to wait all day ... just about twenty minutes or so. My dad is in Helena this morning buying seed. He should be heading back soon.”

George looked at his fish, and then looked down the road. He just wanted to get home in time for lunch. His mother might have preferred trout, but a fish this big was going to feed the whole family. Sure enough, within ten minutes a dust cloud appeared at

the end of the road and a slow moving pickup truck broke through it making its way toward them.

“That would be my dad.” Jack moved the fish completely onto George’s legs and got up to wave him down.

They loaded the fish in the back and George opted to sit in the back with it. Jack slid into the front seat and his father latched the tailgate. “I say we take that fish of yours back into Helena. I’d like to see what she weighs.”

“I’d kinda like to get her home.”

“She’ll be fine. We can pack her in ice. That there is the biggest fish I ever seen. We at least should find out how big she really is.” Jack’s father was a good man but was also one not to be messed with. People usually backed down to him and George was not the exception.

The fish drew a crowd at the Helena General Store. A fish that big was a site to see and a town like Helena didn’t have ‘sites to see’ very often. She barely fit on the meet scale and the manager shook his head as he looked at the sliders. “This here might be a record. I sure ain’t ever seen anything like it.” He lifted the fish off of the scale, readjusted the weights, and then set her down again. “Son, if this scale ain’t broken, this here bass weighs twenty two pounds- four ounces.” He walked over to a shelf and pulled down a fishing almanac. After leafing through it, he found what he was looking for. “The current record is just over twenty.”

With that, one of the men that had followed them in added, “You know that Field and Stream is offering seventy five dollars worth of merchandise to the biggest fish caught this year. If that is the biggest bass ever caught, you have yourself a seventy five dollar fish there.”

That raised the level of excitement from those who had gathered around and soon the fish was being carried across the street to the certified scales of the post office. The storeowner placed the fish down and with the help of one of the postal workers reweighed the fish. “Twenty two four,” he called out when the scale had settled. A few men let up a cheer. Helena was now home to a world record.

They carried the fish back across the street and packed it in ice. By now the store had cleared out leaving the paperwork to be filled out, certified, and mailed to Field and

Stream. Seventy-five dollars worth of stuff was hard to even imagine. At the very least, George was going to get his own pole and reel out of this.

Carrying the fish out to the truck, the storeowner looked back over his shoulder. “What are you going to do with this thing?”

“What do you mean what am I going to do with it? I’m going to eat it.” George was following close behind.

The owner seemed confused by the answer. “Have you ever eaten a lake bass? Those things aren’t the tastiest fish.”

“It tastes better than hunger.” George jumped in the back of the truck, ready to head back to a family that knew exactly what to do with a trophy bass.

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*On June 2, 1932, George Perry caught a 22 lb. 4 oz. bass on Georgia’s Montgomery Lake. At the time, it was the biggest large mouth bass ever caught. That record still stands seventy-three years later. It took his family two days to finish eating it.*