

The Fish House

A Storm was coming....

He had been fishing for some time now.....inside his fish house.

It was the coldest season of the year. Winter in the year 1925.

It was late afternoon under a cold and darkening grey Minnesota sky. With his ice spud, it had taken him 5 minutes to chop the hole precisely locating it on the lake. After he had chopped the hole, he pulled the little house over that hole and lined it up with the hole already cut into the floor of his fish house. He knew this fishing spot by drawing an imaginary line with his eye from the eagles nest in the large white pine on the north side of the lake to the dead birch hanging over the lake on the southeast side. This was his base line. Then, in deep snow, he walked 330 steps from the south most lake edge following this line to the point at which he now sat staring at a small floating cork bobber. If little snow, but good traction on the ice, he stepped off 306 steps. All ending up in the same spot. He knew the counts because he had to drag the old fish house every foot. He did this twice every winter, once to set out the fish house and once back to shore before ice out, not counting his many treks to actually fish.

Putting up with that labor was essential. A Minnesota winter has killed more than one unprotected person while fishing on large AND small lakes. Add darkness, winds out of a nightmare and never ending curtains of horizontal snow, the equation is set for a fisherman to get lost, freeze to death or fall through the ice - not necessarily in that order. The walk to and from the fish house, once set, was something he never took for granted.

If a fish house was positioned from the start of the season, just right and over good structure below, it would stay there all winter. He never had to move his twice once set. He always caught fish right where he was and he would smile with that thought.

It was January. The baby would be born in a few months. He wondered if it would be a boy or a girl. It made no difference to him but there is a lot of work to do on the farm so either would eventually do what is required. All the same, he had a boys name in mind if it was a boy and he knew she had in mind a girls name if it was a girl.

The cork bobber never really sat motionless even though there hadn't been a single wave since freeze up. This time of year the small variations of moving ice from the continual thickening and growing of the lakes' ice caused the water level in the open hole to rise and fall as if the lake under him was alive and breathing.

Sometimes a fisherman can see far into the future and sometimes he can't just by watching the bobber. Sometimes for an ice fisherman the bobber isn't just something connected to a string which in turn is connected to a hook lost in the depths of a lake. To him it was actually a window into a moment of time he is free to wonder in. That's where he was right now. A traveler on a knives' edge of time.

To be sure, he was quite aware of the wind building outside the fish house walls. He was comforted by the fact he had built it from the ground up with the emphasis on weight reduction. From the sawmill, he ordered air dried pine 2 by 2's and spaced them 2 feet on center between the top plate and bottom plate, also of 2 x 2's, to create the walls of a 4 foot by 6 foot rectangle. Small wood gusset brackets strengthened the frame. The roof was a

“slant roof.” 7 feet high on one side slanting to 6 foot 3 inches the entire long length on the opposite side. Plywood was expensive and it wouldn't be until 1928 the industry would standardize into 4 foot by 8 foot sheets. He bought two sheets from the sawmill. One sheet came out to be 5' by 5' which he cut just right for the floor so he had no waste and nothing left over. The other sheet was 4'X6' which the sawmill only had one of and would work perfectly for the roof. He had used smaller lengths of flat and round pieces of steel from an abandoned rail road freight car to fashion the fish house base with skids he bolted to the plywood floor. Black heavy tar paper covered the entire exterior. Thin cut slab wood given free to him by the sawmill for buying the plywood, was nailed on for the walls in a standard ship-lap form. He made a narrow “in swinging door” and installed two small windows - material all from the rail road car, sealing up the fish house.

The fish start biting in January at about 4 pm on this Minnesota lake.... about the time it starts getting dark. He had two old coal oil lanterns with new wicks. One lantern actually did a pretty good job of lighting up the fish house and also giving him a little warmth, at least enough so he could take his gloves off when necessary. Only when it was extremely cold, like tonight, did he light the second lantern.... coal oil, also known as kerosene, after all, was not free.

Scattered within the “breaths” of the lake, loud sharp cracking sounds shot across the surface. He could hear a start of a new crack begin far off in the distance with a crescendoing “rip” as it passed closely by the fish house, sometimes right under his feet. The water in the hole could rise as much 2 inches as the ice settled down to its new expanded condition. He studied the bobber after being momentarily startled by the last fracturing explosion of the ice below. The bobber stabilized.

He was glad he and his wife lived far away from Minneapolis. His best friend died 6 months ago of smallpox there. They had ice fished together many times over the years on this very spot and in this very fish house. Hard times for his friend before the smallpox took him. He had been trying to get a job at the flour mill in Minneapolis and had moved into a nearby cheap boarding house sharing everything with “who knows how many.” The papers where saying many more are dying all around Minnesota but most of the deaths were in Minneapolis for some reason. Yes, sometimes a fisherman can see into the future and sometimes he can't. In this case, he couldn't and that before the new baby was a year old 500 Minnesotans would die from the this thing called smallpox.

“Wow, that was some gust!” He said aloud. His attention was drawn away from the bobber to outside. Through the window facing east, he could see it was snowing hard. As the last light of the day was fading the snow fell sideways from left to right carried on the northwest wind.

37 years earlier, he, himself, was just a baby and blissfully unaware of what was going on outside of his window then. His parents had settled near a small town west of Brainerd. It was there his family experienced his first Storm.

He knew his parents called it the “Children's Blizzard.” Others called it the “Great Blizzard.” In 1888 hundreds of people died in the storm as it traveled out of Colorado and through Minnesota. Many more died from the resulting amputations from frostbite and infection complications afterwards. It was in January back then that most of the deaths came from children trying to get home from school.

History would report that in the late 1800's, North America was experiencing a “little Ice age.” The entire earth cooled as a result of the 1883 eruption of Krakatoa in Indonesia. Still effecting the climate years later in December of 1887, 40 inches of snow had fallen in Minnesota. Then,

in early January, a disastrous ice storm hit. A week after the ice storm of January 5, 1888, the weather warmed to a couple of beautiful sunny days. It was a Thursday, January 12, 1888, he played in a crib as a baby instead of walking to school as a student on an “unusually warm and sunny day.” However, many children did walk to school that day, for the last time.

It was a good idea to have a second lantern in the fish house. He had often heard and was always reminded during any given project or event, the old adage was right, “if you only have one of something, it is not enough.” In this case, the extra light and warmth added to the feeling of security as he jiggled his line and bobber which in turn twitched the hook and worm 30 feet below. He had lots of worms that he had transferred from the compost pile at the edge of the garden to the warmth of the cellar earlier in the fall. Crappies were his favorite and it would be easy to filet out the bones for the new baby.

From outside the fish house, a passerby would see a yellow glow of light through both frost covered windows. Except, that light had only one witness tonight and he was huddled inside a fish house over a bobber. He was holding a two foot long pole, alone, on the middle of a remote Minnesota lake, under a now jet black night.

“Time never really stands still,” he guessed. “But it comes close sometimes while ice fishing,” he thought. He wondered if he could actually MAKE time stop here, now, with no one watching. What’s to stop him from making one small impossible miracle? Nothing. He laughed a hesitating exhaling smile as he reconsidered the possibility. It occurred to him that STOPPING time was more likely than going BACK in time. Going BACK in time has to be impossible because once the crappie is hooked, well, it’s hooked. But, the FUTURE.... that’s different. The Future is just a “Breath away” from NOW. Which seems pretty darn close by to “RIGHT NOW.” That is probably why he liked Ice fishing because he was so close to seeing into the future. “I am working on it,” he thought.

The crappie is the second most valued fish in any Minnesota lake, he figured. For eating, only perhaps the walleye is valued more or equally. “The crappie can bite so lightly,” he thought. He could only compare it to a wisp of wind passing by a tree trunk...unnoticed. However, a good ice fisherman knows how to balance the right bobber on the right line set up for the best telltale signal the crappie is interested far below in the blackness of the water. Certainly there are times the bobber disappears in a second and a slight hook set with steady line retrieval puts “one in the bucket.” But there are times, he knew, more than not, that the infamous ‘Paper Mouths’ already have the hook in their mouths without even the slightest indication at the bobber! Sometimes he saw the bobber actually “rise” turning the bobber on its side in a sort of slow motion experiment in impossible engineering.

He didn't know there was already a 3 foot snow drift outside his door. But it would make no difference. Years of experience with ice fishing taught him to always face the door of his fish house towards the closest shoreline and never fish in an “out swinging” door fish house. “Both lessons could save your life,” he would say. With the door facing the direction OFF the ice it would give a person a referenced starting point in dark or bad weather. The “in swing” door ensured you would never get trapped inside from a variety of exterior calamities like the snow drift building just outside and in front of the door. “An inadvertently knocked over lantern inside a fish house can be an instant death sentence if you can’t escape quickly,” he knew.

He had a pocket watch but never carried it onto the ice. It was a gift from his father many years ago before he died. He didn't want to lose it in the snow or drop it through a hole. Then again, he never felt he needed to know the exact time while fishing because going home

would not happen until he had at least a half a dozen fish. "One thing had not much to do with the other," he often said.

The wind was so strong now, he realized that if he hadn't piled snow up all round the base of the fish house when he first set it out, he and the house would be flying across the ice sheet instead of locked tightly where it now stood.

Sometimes an ice fisherman can see into the future and sometimes he can't. He figured it might be the same for women, but he was a man and couldn't be sure about what a women can see. A man sees what other men see. He would leave it up to a women to think about the other. The point is he wasn't perfect at looking into the future. "Things would be different" he thought to himself, "if he had more time to watch the bobber." If he was better at concentrating on the bobber, he would have warned his neighbor in 15 years not to go duck hunting on that warm November day in 1940. It would be known at the Armistice Day Blizzard. His neighbor would be one of 49 Minnesotans to die on a day when temperatures would go from the middle 60's in the afternoon to 9 degree's that night. 50 mile per hour winds and 27 inches of snow would trap his neighbor after his duck boat sank in 5 foot waves. He would die on a small spit of land in the middle of the Mississippi. No witness lived to repeat his neighbors last words.

The fish house was now responding to the ever increasing tempest of wind and snow doing its best to awake a traveler. "It must be 8 o'clock," he finally said aloud. He counted 9 large crappies in the bucket. He had a vague memory of each one caught. He would be bringing home dinner for two nights and maybe a little left over for a lunch time fish sandwich for the baby via mom. It was time to leave the safety of the time capsule known also as the fish house.

It was time to go home.

He stood and blew out the second lantern. That one would stay in the fish house. He rolled up his line. He repositioned his beaver fur hat on his head and tied the earflaps tight down over his ears and under his chin. The doors' long wooden handle accommodated nicely his thick fur lined deer skin mittens he was now putting on. He stuck his right arm through the handle of the metal bucket of crappies until the wire handle rested on his forearm and lifted the prize while grabbing the old lighted lantern at the same time with the same right hand. He opened the door to the Storm with his left hand. Saying nothing, he stepped out and through the snowbank while closing the door. Walking straight ahead and into the blackness, he started to count each step.

Inside the now empty and dark old fish house and in front of a hole in its floor, sat a single common milking stool. On it, positioned just right, rested a simple cork bobber.

A Storm was coming.

- 1) Wikipedia-History of Plywood.
- 2) MNopedia-Smallpox epidemic of 1924-25 by Paul Nelson
- 3) Wikipedia-The Great Blizzard of 1888
- 4) Wikipedia-1940 Armistice Day Blizzard

