

How to Hook a Worm

It happens whenever a new fishing season rolls around. I miss my Uncle John. He was the Old Man's half-brother, and the first time we all went fishing together I thought he was half-witted. Uncle John was different.

He came to fish when my folks owned Three Lakes Haven Resort on Big Stone Lake, part of the Three Lakes chain of lakes. He got into the boat wearing a suit, a tie and his good dress shoes. That's different.

"Your father keeps his boat clean as his car," Uncle John said. "You could eat off the floor."

The Old Man said ever since they stopped working in the iron ore mines up in the Mesabi Range and Uncle John could afford new suits and new shoes, he wore them a lot.

Everywhere. Even fishing. He liked to dress up and he liked to fish with his older brother. He did fish with a towel over his lap. So? To each his own as my mother used to say.

Uncle John was a little squeamish about handling fish, I thought. He would wrinkle his nose at the struggling bluegill in his hand, unhook it, delicately thread on a new worm and plunk the fresh rig back into the water. He slathered his hands with Ponds cream, rubbed them together and then his cork would go down again. I always thought he was ambivalent about seeing his cork go down again.

When Uncle John had gone back to Two Rivers with frozen packages of bluegill fillets, I told the Old Man I thought he was so busy hooking and unhooking bluegills and putting them in the fish bag that it took awhile to sink in that every time he was pulling up a fish in the stern, it seemed that John was baiting up again in the bow.

The Old Man said it finally dawned on him that John had not thrown over a single bluegill for the fish bag. Not one. But, there he was, putting fresh nightcrawlers on his hook like there was no tomorrow. John was apparently missing hits and losing many fish, because he sure as hell was losing many nightcrawlers. Yet, the bluegills down there at 40 feet were hitting so hard they practically hooked themselves.

Finally, a defining moment arrived — although I don't think the Old Man ever said "defining" in his entire

North Country Notebook



by *George Vukelich*

Slavic life. He had just brought up another platter bluegill, tossed it into the mesh bag and was waiting for his bell sinker to hit bottom. He stared at John, who was staring at his clean-as-a-whistle hook. Aha! The Old Man thought. Aha!

"John," he said. "Show me how you hook the worm."

John wrinkled up his nose, reached a nightcrawler out of the coffee can and ever, ever so carefully draped the nightcrawler over the hook. Just as carefully, he lowered the crawler into the tea-brown water. Then, he washed and dried his worm hand and recreated it with the Ponds.

The Old Man remembers John saying that he hadn't thought catching fish was going to be "this hard," considering that Uncle John was a little weird. The Old Man smiled.

The Old Man recalled another weird scene.

It was a hot summer day and they were fishing in deep water. Twenty. Thirty. Forty feet. He and John had redworms, nightcrawlers and hellgrammites in separate cans. Uncle John wrinkled up his nose at all of them, especially the hellgrammites. "Those bugs," he called them. He said he would use a nightcrawler because they seemed cleaner and firmer and didn't live in manure piles like those little redworms.

Fine, the Old Man said. They could save the hellgrammites for later. Hellgrammites were your ace-in-the-hole for really big bluegills in deep water in hot weather. They had only two dozen hellgrammites because hellgrammites were pretty expensive in those days and you didn't want to squander them on little bluegills. Let

them eat the cheaper bait.

So, John would start out fishing with a nightcrawler. The Old Man started out with a redworm.

"I catch fish right away," the Old Man said. "Not big ones yet, but not bad. Good eating. John does not catch fish."

The Old Man got the cotton mesh fish bag out, and screwed the C-clamp onto the wooden gunwale. He was letting the redworm hit bottom and then, pulling it up a foot. Bang!

Bluegills began to hit the redworm. He yelled to John. "Forty feet, nice fish!" the Old Man said pulling the fish up. The two of them were fishing practically in the same place. The Old Man showed John how to hook a nightcrawler and John's eyes got big as light bulbs.

John confided later that he tried tying the nightcrawler onto the hook, but he couldn't make a good knot because the crawler made itself slippery.

The Old Man showed Uncle John how to use little bitty pieces of crawler and hide the barb. John did it and bang!

"Like pulling up a pail!" he yelled.

Eventually, they found the really big bluegills, and Uncle John even fished with the hellgrammites, hooking them "right behind the collar without killing them." The Old Man remembered that they caught their limits — 100 fish.

At day's end, when they pulled up the mesh bag, they discovered it was empty. Empty! No fish in it! There was a hole at the bottom. The Old Man said a turtle probably did it, and damn it all to hell. He should have been checking. A whole day wasted!

Uncle John didn't feel so bad. He wiped off the Ponds cream and said he would row. The Old Man remembered that John was happy as a lark all the way home, and was chattering like a bird about coming fishing tomorrow. Same place. Forty feet.

When they got back to the dock, he showed The Old Man his blisters. Some were broken and watery. Uncle John wiped them with a clean handkerchief made a face and said "Oooh."

Then, he put Ponds cream on them.