

The tug *Barney Devine* was lifting nets off the Two Rivers-Point Beach coast, and the feeling of *déjà vu* was very strong. Again, there was a gill net, albeit nylon, sun-beaded, dripping, climbing out of the cold green Lake Michigan waters. Again, there was a clutch of herring gulls, good old plodding, pre-Jonathan gulls, short on speed, long on patience. And again, there was a tanned, crinkle-faced skipper, a cigar clamped in his mouth, leaning over the port gunwhale and waiting for lake trout to come aboard.

As a boy, queasy and awed on this very water, I used to see a ton of lake trout in a morning's lift, and each trout was a beautiful, natural-born fish, longer than the Old Man's arm. Another morning, thirty years later, every single lake trout we saw would be a hatchery fish — fin-clipped and duly recorded and put there by the DNR, Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources.

Waiting with his clipboard and tennies, Ron Poff, DNR's Supervisor of Great Lakes Fisheries, watched the first lake trout flop into the shallow plastic tank in front of biologist Paul Schultz. "We haven't seen a naturally reproduced lake trout since the mid 1950's," Ron

had told me in his Madison office. The trout before us was no exception.

First Paul measured the fish on the tank's built-in ruler. Then he noted the pattern of fin clips. (Every planted fish is clipped differently, enabling biologists to tell at a glance the exact year the trout was stocked.) He turned the fish over, looking for lamprey scars. (Lampreys seem to leave trout under sixteen inches pretty much alone.) The fish was still full of life, so Paul tagged it, read off the serial number for Ron, and gently heaved the fish over the starboard side. It sank out of sight into what will always be, for me, the mysterious depths.

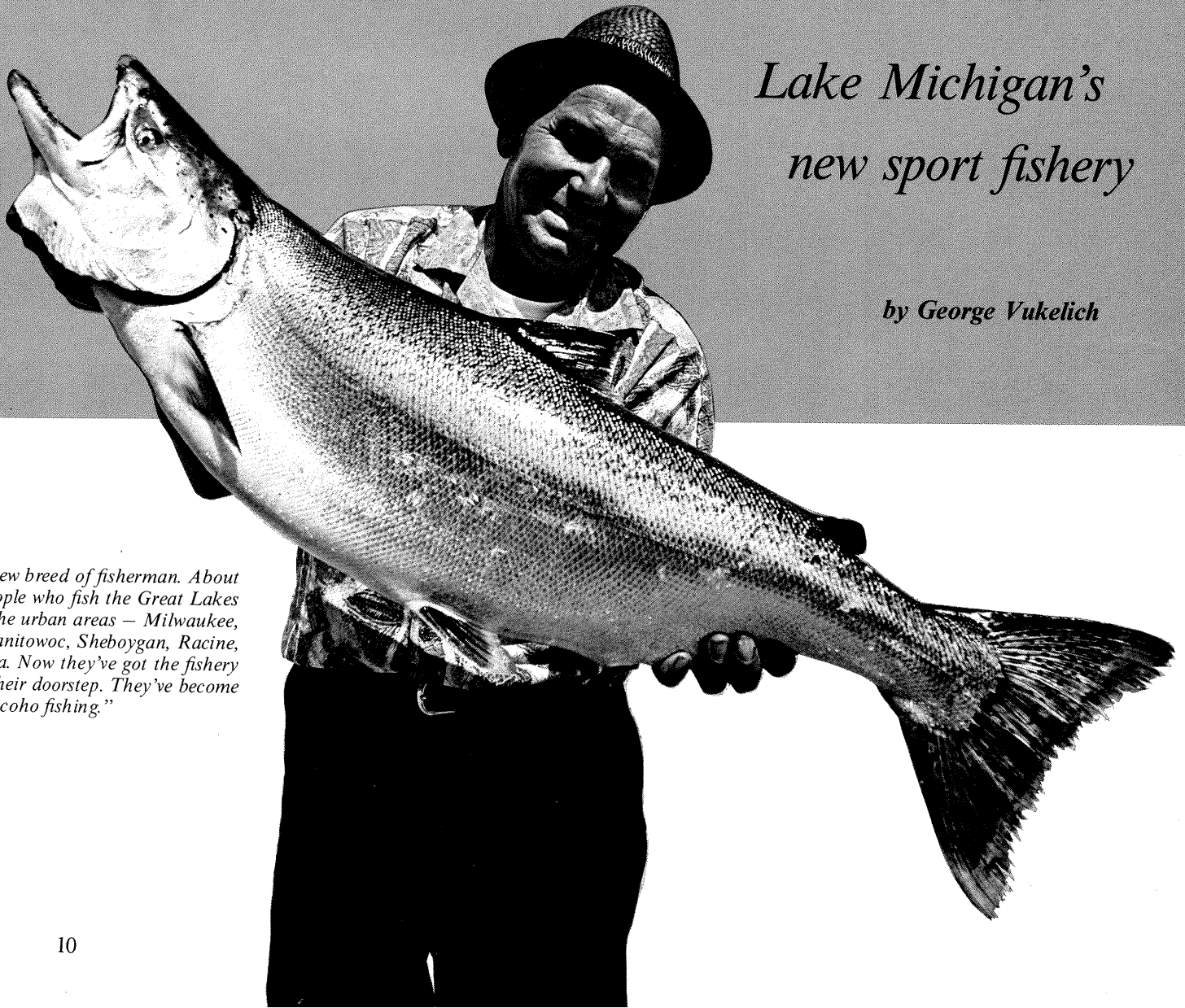
Those depths don't seem quite as mysterious for Ron Poff and his fellow scientists, although Ron does allow in his kind, unscientific way: "There's an awful lot about the lakes that we just don't know." What they do know is that Lake Michigan is now producing some of the greatest sport fishing in the world and that the situation is an entirely artificial one, created and managed by man.

This state of affairs came about because of the near

Big Lake / Big Fish

*Lake Michigan's
new sport fishery*

by George Vukelich



"It's a new breed of fisherman. About half the people who fish the Great Lakes are from the urban areas — Milwaukee, Manitowoc, Sheboygan, Racine, Kenosha. Now they've got the fishery right at their doorstep. They've become addicted to coho fishing."

decimation of the lake-trout population by the sea lamprey, a parasitic eel that attaches itself to the fish by its raspy, suckerlike mouth and literally bleeds the fish to death. "The lamprey," Ron explains, "created a desert in Lake Michigan and a near desert in Lake Superior." (The lamprey prefers warmer temperatures than the chill waters of Superior provide and thus its inroads on Superior's lake-trout population have not been as devastating as in warmer Lake Michigan.)

With a large, natural predator like the lake trout removed from the scene, the alewife — a "trash" fish long resident in the St. Lawrence system — was able, as Ron Poff puts it, "to explode into the picture on Lake Michigan." (The alewife, too, prefers warmer waters, so its numbers in Lake Superior are miniscule.) "Reported commercial catches of alewives," Ron confides dramatically, "are fewer than 100 pounds for all Lake Superior, and over 25,000,000 pounds on Lake Michigan!"

Prolific beyond comprehension, clogging storm-sewer outlets, intake valves, filtration systems, beaches, and bays, the bony, silvery, trash fish mushroomed into a lakeshore-dweller's nightmare — and a fish-manager's dream. To capitalize on the tremendous food-base alewives provided in Lake Michigan, Wisconsin undertook a major stocking program that eventually planted a mil-



"The bulk of the charter trolling occurs off Algoma and Kewaunee — that area — but there's fantastic growth in all charter-boat fishing, and areas like Manitowoc and Sheboygan really have blossomed out in the last couple of years."

"The future? Well, in older civilizations, the people pressure got so great that some things had to be ignored just so the people could live. Ultimately we may have to use the lakes for other things. We may not be able to afford the luxury of a fishery in the Great Lakes."



lion trout in the big lake. Rainbow trout were stocked in 1963; brown trout in 1965. Also in 1965, with a federally supported program, lake trout were reintroduced. The lampreys in Lake Michigan don't bother anything except lake trout, but the eels certainly would if the DNR didn't keep planting trout and setting, as Ron says, "a real dinner table for the lampreys."

But the great breakthrough in the sports fishery, Ron admits, came in 1966, when the state of Michigan stocked coho salmon, also known as silver salmon. Wisconsin followed suit with a coho plant of some 25,000 fish at Algoma in 1968. In 1969, following Michigan's lead again, Wisconsin released some 68,000 Chinook salmon at Strawberry Creek near the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal.

"In 1969," Ron says with a kind of trout-eating grin, "our sport fisheries took off like wildfire."

- Brown trout, gorged to the gills on alewives, came to be called "footballs with fins," and ten-pounders were commonplace.

- A rainbow trout weighing nearly seventeen pounds was caught off Door County. It set a new state record.

- Coho salmon ran in the vicinity of fifteen pounds consistently, and it was rumored there were Chinook in the lake that you just would not hold with anything but deep-sea tackle and star drags. (And you'd best be strapped down in a fighting chair to boot!)

"Big Chinook are out there all right," Ron agrees. "I think this is the year we'll see some forty-pounders taken." The presence of the Chinook, the famed king salmon, may be a portent of the future. Though the coho are spectacular, leaping fighters and currently the number one drawing card in the lake, their life cycle is only three years. And then, whether they're caught

("harvested" is the euphemism) or not, they die.

The coho, like all the salmonids, seeks out streams in which to spawn. Unfortunately, with the exception of a tiny coho hatch at Little Scarboro Creek, all Wisconsin streams flowing into Lake Michigan are too short, too sluggish, or too something for natural reproduction. "Even in Michigan," Ron says, "in the high-quality, sand-country streams where they *do* have natural coho reproduction, it's not enough to sustain the coho fishery."

Chinook salmon, on the other hand, are also spectacular fighters, and though they wouldn't reproduce either in our waters, they have a life cycle of four years. You can see the appeal for a fish manager, and Ron Poff doesn't deny it. As long as the bottom of the food pyramid stays constant, and as long as the predators at the peak of the pyramid can't reproduce themselves, fish managers can determine what species occupies the top. Coho could be "phased out," in Ron's words, over a three-year period simply by making no plants during that time. The vacuum could be filled with another variety that has more qualities to recommend it — such as the Chinook salmon with its longer life span and greater size.

The lure of forty-pound trophies is something to be reckoned with, and there is predictable and growing pressure from charter trollers (who already account for 60 percent of the sport-fish catch) to stock more Chinook and coho salmon as opposed to brown and rainbow trout.

The latter provide the bulk of shore, surf, stream, and breakwater fishing and can be reached without big boats and major expenditures. They provide a "poor man's fishery," and that's the only way a lot of us go. They put meat on our tables and memories in our minds.

There was Moonlight Bay on a duck-hunting kind of November morning, cold and gray as gunmetal. Ten-pound browns by the hundreds were throwing themselves skyward in a primal ritual that seemed old as earth, old as water. We stopped fishing and just watched.

There were bright searing mornings in the boiling surf when huge rainbows by twos and threes flashed by, hunting in the wave troughs. And even when the water washed in over the tips of my patched waders, I just plain yelped for joy. The blue-silver clio would catch the wind and soar and dip wildly like some free, unfettered thing.

Ron Poff says the DNR is very aware of the desires of shore and breakwater fishermen, from Kenosha all the way up to the tip of the land where Wisconsin stops. About 88 percent of the people fishing the Wisconsin waters of Lake Michigan are Wisconsin residents (the figure is 75 percent on Lake Superior), and the DNR aims to keep them all happy, whether they're soaking spawn sacks off Westers Beach or flinging spoons off South Milwaukee.

The beauty of fishing coho in the spring is that the salmon are in shallow water and you can reach them from the breakwaters and from small boats. For the rest of the year the coho are anywhere from one mile to ten miles offshore, and the only way to reach them is by trolling with a big boat.

My friend, a musky fisherman, downgraded the whole business, whether in close or far out.



"What we've attempted to do in Wisconsin is to create a diversified fishery by using brook and brown trout, coho and Chinook salmon, and lake trout. We wanted to create a fish for all seasons out there, and we've done that."



"The fishery is not confined to the lake itself. When you picture Lake Michigan fishing, don't think just of trolling, because we've got a tremendous pier and breakwater fishery — people casting right off the breakwaters."

"Where's the sport?" he asked smugly. "You troll with a motor, the fish hooks itself, and you derrick him in."

"Derrick your ear," I told him. "Bring your musky gear."

And one memorable, rolling, sun-washed morning, he did. The *Boston Whaler* rode trimly in the little chop, and the musky fisherman sat in supreme confidence clutching his hallowed Silaflex rod, its Ambassadeur 6000 reel filled with 10-pound-test monofilament. Far beyond the stern, a few feet down, his silver spoon was flashing and fluttering through the green water. The musky fisherman was ready and waiting.

He was ready and waiting for the better part of an hour. He smoked one pipeload of tobacco and packed up another. He emptied one mug of coffee and slobbered it full again. Suddenly, the waiting was over. His mouth



"In the autumn, we see fall-spawning rainbows coming in close to land, we see the brown trout fishery picking up along the shore, and we see coho beginning to concentrate off all our stocking sites."

opened, but the word about to form came out as a hoot. The Silaflex bent double, and far astern a silver body sailed high above the waters. The crescent leap was a good four feet above the surface. The *Ambassadeur* screeched; the line zinged out. The fish exploded into the air again, and then drove straight down.

The musky fisherman held the rod tip high, forcing the fish to fight that throbbing, sapping, tough-backed rod. The salmon ran anyway. And jumped. And ran again. For close to ten minutes, he was all over, driving hard. Even when he came to the boat, he wasn't belly up. Enmeshed, his muscular silver body thrashed heavily in the outsize net.

"Coho?" the musky fisherman asked. I told him yes, but a fairly small one — about five pounds, maybe a little more. The musky fisherman looked at his fish closely. "My God," he said.

The coho does that to people. Catching one is an unforgettable thrill. But you don't even have to be a coho nut to dig the Lake Michigan fishery. Its impressive statistics could turn on a bookkeeper:

- The Lake Michigan sport-fishery (with Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana waters included) currently is estimated to be worth \$31,000,000!
- Wisconsin (which in 1971 spent over \$900,000 to raise and stock fish in the Great Lakes area) figures it makes a return of \$14 for every single dollar it spends in the program.
- Wisconsin also figures it gets back eight pounds of fish for every pound of fish it stocks.

Ron Poff says that as a biologist he would like to see Lake Michigan get back to its "historic" fishery of lake trout, whitefish, perch, several species of chub, and burbot. That was the balance nature had worked out in the lake, but realistically the chances of it being restored are practically nonexistent because Lake Michigan is aging so rapidly. "The process of eutrophication," Ron says with a sigh, "is appearing more and more in Lake Michigan."

The quality of water is declining. There is DDT in the lake, industrial pollutants, a proliferation of shoreline power plants, the swelling pressure of millions upon millions of people in lakeshore communities . . . "You'd grow old too," Ron continues, "taking that kind of abuse."

As we stood aboard the tug, looking down at the lake, he blamed the deteriorating water quality for the plight of lake trout and chubs. "The lake trout don't seem to be reproducing themselves," he said. "We see them on the reefs, but they're only going through the motions!"

"And the chubs?" I asked.

"Well, of seven species," he replied, "six have vanished from the lake. And" — he half smiled — "the one that's left, the bloater, is the least desirable."

I asked him if there was a moral in there somewhere, but he didn't answer. Instead, he volunteered that the traditional Lake Michigan commercial fisherman with his pond and gill nets may be on the way out. "The charter troller," he said, "is our commercial fisherman now. Sure, Lake Michigan is an artificial creation," he admitted. "But it is the best we can do at the moment with the knowledge we have."

In a way, fishing Lake Michigan these days is sad, at least for this beach boy who grew up in the days of creosoted nets and one-ton lifts and arm-long lake trout. True, the coho and the Chinook are exotic beyond belief, but there is DDT in their adipose tissue. The brown trout are big as beagle dogs, but they may be replaced by "tiger-trout," a hybrid that isn't susceptible to fungus attacks.

Perhaps, I offered, the only natural, unartificial, real lives out there now — beyond man's control or caprice — belong to the alewife and the sea lamprey. I said I could see some little irony in that. "I don't think," Ron replied, looking directly at me, "we can ever go back to the pristine environment that we once had in Lake Michigan." I nodded in agreement, but later, as the *Barney Devine* swung around north and started up the coast for the hour-long run back to Keweenaw, while the crew was storing nets and hosing down the deck, I took a thermos of coffee up to Frank Smith at the wheel. The skipper was an old commercial fisherman himself, and in the old days never sailed "with sonar and stylus profiles of the bottom."

I watched the horizon stretching ahead of us and the wake boiling away behind us, and somehow I went back to the pristine environment. I don't know about Frank. It was hard to see his eyes behind the big Polaroid sunglasses. I couldn't tell for sure. But maybe he went back too.