

On the trail of the coho

Trolling Lake Michigan for the elusive salmon on the incredible fishing machines

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RACINE — The big white Petrie Starcraft was a long mile outside the Racine harbor, following a gentle, southerly course at about four knots through the sun-kissed mid-morning Lake Michigan swell.

We were dragging five lines behind us for coho salmon.

The Executive and I sat in the open cockpit and munched our sandwiches. Under the shadow of the canopy, Bob Resch sat at the wheel and munched on his pipe.

The Executive turned and peered in at the Vexilar Video Sonar that occupied so much of Robert's attention. The little screen registered one continuous line for the lake bottom at 50 feet and another wavier line for the downrigger at 15 feet.

Periodically there were clusters of small blips near the surface marking baitfish, but there were no larger blips around that would be the big fish.

The Vexilar readings were confirmed by the Humminbird Depth Sounder mounted next to it. Smooth bottom at 50. Down rigger flashing at 15.

Next to the wheel, below the compass, the console-mounted thermometer registered surface water at a constant 50 degrees.

I COULDN'T HELP wondering what my Old Man would have thought of these nifty electronic marvels — what Johnny California always called "The Goodies" — fully mindful that the LeClair family had fished lake trout for a lifetime out of Two Rivers and the most sophisticated instrument they ever had on board all that time was the pee-can.

I was struck again by the wisdom of the philosopher who first observed that what separates the men from the boys is the price of their toys.

Earlier, in the pre-dawn drive from Madison, Resch had allowed that you could spend a lot of money chasing the salmon on Lake Michigan if

you lived inland and had to make a major expedition out of getting over there with your own boat.

He had left his own smaller Michigan-rigged Starcraft at home this day and The Executive had done likewise with his salmon-rigged tri-hull. In the company of these two affluent semi-retirees, I felt almost bereft and naked, as befit my position of minority stockholder in a mortgaged canoe.

THE EXECUTIVE worked on his sandwich and opened his coffee thermos.

Behind the gold wire-rims his eyes were blue and cool as the lake water.

"Well," he said in a sort of bird-colonel's voice. "Where the hell are the coho?"

Resch took the pipe from his mouth.

"They're supposed to be in 55-degree water," he said with a little smile. "Only there doesn't seem to be any 55-degree water today."

The wind sang softly through the downriggers in a nearly human voice. In the waxy green surface water, dead and dying alewives washed in past us from the scented open lake. In the haze that was burning off all around us, other boats were poking around, some in close to shore, some almost out of sight on the eastern horizon, and all of them searching hard for salmon.

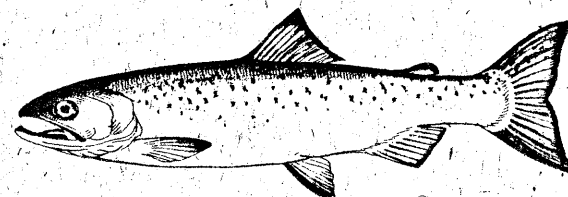
Resch said that the bigger craft were probably charter boats.

The radio crackled and we heard a whimsical skipper, calling himself Empty Pockets, trying to raise The Blue Goose. The Goose checked in with a bearing off the Case plant, announcing that they had four small fish "in the box" and noting that they had also "roostered" a couple more.

Resch explained that a roostered fish was a lost fish.

"In the box," he smiled, "is in the box."

EMPTY POCKETS said he would join the Goose and the radio went si-



lent. It was enough to make you wonder how the hell anybody had ever found fish in the old days.

Of course, in those olden days, a lot of folks, including my Old Man, had found fish the hard way by walking out on the concrete Government Pier at South Milwaukee, carrying their gear in galvanized pails, and setting out their trolley lines for the big lake perch. The surest way to locate the perch, the Old Man always said, was to look for the breakwater fishermen who spoke Romanian or Croatian or Polish.

Those were the fishermen who found the fish, the Old Man said.

And you found them. It also helped if you spoke the language a little. And bitter a lot than a little.

THEY WERE ALL gone now, those Old Country fishermen who fished from the shore of Lake Michigan for food in another, harsher time.

Today, New Country fishermen like The Executive trolled this great inland sea in unbelievable fishing machines. And they fished, not so much for food as for sport.

At breakfast over eggs and sausage, The Executive had patiently explained that he loved his fishing and his north country lifestyle so much he had said no when his most recent corporation had wanted him to move to Texas. Earlier in his career, he had said no when Kraft Foods had wanted him to move from Minnesota to Chicago. That's when he had come to Madison and joined Reg Dot. And discovered salmon fishing out in the big lake.

"My Old Man fished this lake all his life," I said out loud. "And he never saw a salmon here."

"The way things are going," The Executive said, "he won't be the only one."

He was almost prophetic. The morning passed without a single strike. Not one.

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RESCH SWITCHED four of the rods from spoons to huge streamer flies, one a garish tinselled creation called the Christmas Tree.

"It's called matching the hatch," he said.

The Executive said he had a better idea, and stuck on a little spinner. He dragged it right over the stern, in the middle of our wake. That was his pole and you just knew it would catch something.

Then the line pinned to the port downrigger flew free, the tarpon action flyrod whipped into a tight bow and a gleaming silver body leaped far astern. I grabbed the rod, set the hook and the line went slack.

"Rooster," The Executive said.

It was like striking out on a fat pitch. And before we hung it up in the afternoon chop, I had fanned on two more fish and The Executive had proclaimed "Rooster" two more times. It was a growth experience. I sipped a beer and let the healing wind blow all bitter thoughts out of my little brain box.

When his inevitable strike came on the spinner, he was the consummate old professional. Neat. Stylistic. Flawless. I even netted it for him. As the Old Man used to say, if you can't make the putout, make the assist. It was a coho, about 16 inches.

I caught its twin later and we settled for the pair.

AS WE HAULED the boat out, Resch said it should be better in a couple of weeks. Then I think The Executive said today's deep-sea expedition worked out to a few hundred dollars per fish, figuring in depreciation, amortization and fixed expenses like gasoline, coffee and pipe tobacco.

I thought of the Old Man and all those raggedy bohunks on that South Milwaukee breakwater in the old days, and I was glad nobody had the smarts to plant salmon back then. None of us would ever have made it through the Depression.

In the van on the way out of town, I just managed to catch The Executive in his last lucid moment before he sacked out in back.

How many times, I asked him, can you tell a corporation that you don't want to go where they want you to go?

He didn't even open his eyes.

"Just once," he said. "Just once. Then they don't ask you anymore."

He was sleeping like a baby before we hit the city limits.