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The OLDEST AGRICULTURAL JOURNAL IN THE WORLD



FREE LAND—By Konrad Bercovici



HERE'S ZANE GREY
CLIMBING UP TO
THE OSPREY'S NEST

AT LEFT—THE BIG
HAWKS SNAPPED
FROM ANOTHER TREE

ON THE afternoon of April twelfth we anchored off the mouth of Chatham Bend River, in the lee of the clam shoals. A brisk south wind was blowing, and as a consequence the air was hot and the humidity heavy. It seemed difficult to breathe, and the slightest exertion induced a perspiration. Everything was wet and sticky.

Toward sundown the wind dropped and in a few moments there was a dead calm. We felt relieved at once. And as the sun gradually lost its brilliance the air grew cooler. A few tarpon rolled near the boat. The soft splash of others too far away to see floated to us in the stillness.

Morning came with a warming red sun and a rising wind. We manned the small launch and, dragging our skiffs, we entered the narrow mouth of Chatham Bend River. It did not look at all like any other river we had explored, but I could not tell wherein the difference lay. I was particularly interested in this river, because Captain Thad told me about the notorious outlaw and gunman who had lived on it. The Everglades had harbored many fugitives and many bad men—and it still held its reputation in such regard—but for daring outlawry Watson stood alone. In all my study of Western frontier life, embracing countless books and much travel, and contact with all kinds of desperate characters, I never came across a story of a more desperate tragic end than Watson's. Some day I may write his history.

I was amazed when I saw the place where Watson had lived so many years. Naturally, having seen a few dilapidated shacks along these mangrove shores, hidden in almost inaccessible nooks, I had expected Watson's to be the same, even wilder, as befitted the man's career. But his house was a large, pretentious frame structure, painted, with windows screened, standing on a high open point and backed by a large tract of cultivated land. It was as lonely, however, as any shack that could be found in the Everglades.

SOME ten or twelve miles up Chatham Bend River we entered a wide bay full of oyster bars; and here we went aground so often that I feared we would never find deep water again. But even shallow water in the glades had an end. We got through, and eventually, by devious channels and tunnels under mangroves and bends that left no doubt as to the felicitousness of part of the name bestowed

upon this river, we arrived at a creek that Captain King averred would be full of tarpon. He was so certain about the fish that I ventured to inquire when he had last visited this place.

"Reckon it was about nine years ago," he said. "An' it shore was full of tarpon then. Some regular he-rhino-ceros busters too."

King's creek opened into a little bay, an ideal retreat for the great silver fish, snug and smooth in the lee of mangroves. Our diligent survey found only one tarpon. He was big enough to set us keenly to positions and tackle and bait. While we were getting ready to deprive him of liberty for a while, perhaps his life, he swam to and fro before us, broad tail and long dorsal above water. No sooner had we got our baits out, and a quantity of chum, than the big tarpon got busy. He began to pick up the

pieces of fish we had so kindly thrown in his way. Every time he stood on his head in the three feet of water his broad forked tail came clear out. Fish fins and fish tails had a compelling power to thrill and excite me. Moreover, our boatmen were expressing most extravagant ideas as to the inevitable fact that he was already our tarpon.

Somehow, despite the sanguine remarks of my comrades, I knew that lone tarpon was as safe as if he had been in Lake Okeechobee. He ate up all the chum, swam around and over my bait, and then went to chasing live mullet. He worked away from our position. Once he broke water, showing himself, and he was big and broad and silvery. My companions were ungracious enough to cast slurs upon him. We abandoned the bay and creek for others no better, and at length turned downstream with the tide. The wind, the glare, the heat made me drowsy, and I fell half asleep. Suddenly I was roused by a yell in my ear.

"SNOOK! Snook!" R. C. was waving and pointing as well as yelling. I was in time to see a school of large snook swim away from the boat into deep water. The stream took a sharp turn round a shady point of mangrove. The current was swift.

We anchored the skiffs and went to trolling with our light tackles, using spinners. We had not gone thirty yards before boils and swirls back of our spinners attested to the rush of snook. R. C. hooked a big one. He shook himself free. I hooked another. He made a hard run under the bank and, fouling on a snag, got away.

"Good chances to snap pictures," I said to R. C. "You fish. We'll take turns."

R. C. caught two snook of several pounds each, which we saved to eat. Next he got a fine jump out of a small tarpon. The water was clear and not unlike that of a freshwater stream. In fact, the fishing seemed exactly like that on an inland river, where muskallonge and pike abounded. A snook resembles a muskallonge in appearance, strike and fight. We worked up along the bank, keeping close to the overshadowing brush and roots and leaves. R. C. had a strike for every ten feet of the way.

That was the beginning of a most extraordinary lot of fun. We took turns with my rod, after R. C. had broken his. Certain places along the creek we named appropriately. The best was Snook Corner. We never failed to

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End of a Perfect Fishing Day

By ZANE GREY

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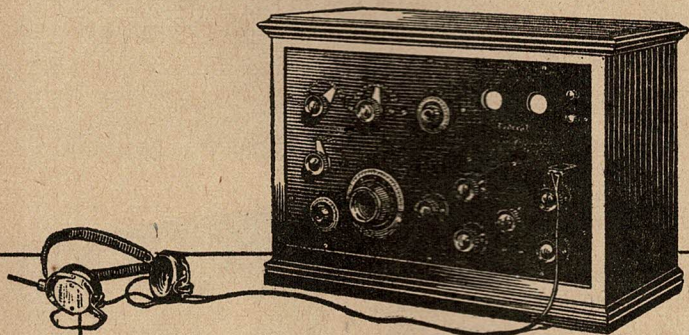
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End of a Perfect Fishing Day

(Continued from Page 11)

hook one here, and if he freed himself, which two out of three fish accomplished, there was always another ready to rush the spinner.

Together we hooked innumerable of these game fish, some too heavy to hold; and we caught twenty, the largest of which ranged from eight to twelve pounds. We used up four rolls of film.

ON OUR return we passed a small mangrove island, and were attracted by the sight of a huge nest of eagle or osprey, black and ragged, in the top of a tree. When we approached a large fish hawk left the nest and soared aloft uttering piercing cries. We soon saw two young hawks, so nearly full fledged that I expected them to fly. But they did not, even when we went close, and even when I climbed an adjoining mangrove to obtain a better picture of nest and birds. At last I was inspired to climb to the very top of the tree, so that I stood beside the nest, within reach of the fish hawks. I was more frightened than they, for I feared the branch would give way under me or the mother bird would swoop down to scalp me.

The hawks were young, but of almost full size, with breasts of creamy white, and wings, head and tail of mottled brown. They faced me with what I took for as much curiosity as fear. They certainly did not betray any instinct to fly, though they backed to the edge of the nest. What sleek, sharp, small heads, eagle shaped! The eyes were black and orange, the orange being the iris; and the light in them was piercingly wild and beautiful. Wild nature! I did not see hate of man or fear of death in these eyes, as I have seen in older birds of prey. Cautiously I laid a hand on the nearer one, which act excited the bird, though not alarmingly; and then I backed down the tree, and returned to the boat.

After several full days of tarpon fishing and of adventures encountered while trying to photograph alligators, sawfish and leaping whip rays, we headed north for Cape Romano.

This cape appeared to be a long narrow strip of rock and sand standing far out into the Gulf. The solid ground was indeed balm for my eyes; and the winding white beach, after the leagues and leagues of grim bright mangroves, positively thrilled me.

Captain Thad had for days talked of the next spring tide, which was due early on the morning of April sixteenth. According to him our tarpon fishing had been poor. "Neap tides are no good," he said. "The tarpon go up in the bays and creeks, spread all over, and stay there even on the ebb. But the first spring tide will fetch them out to find deep holes."

We were up at four o'clock on the morning of the sixteenth; and a little after five, in the dim moist summer morning, we manned the small boats and were off up the mouth of the river.

By the time we were anchored, with R. C. a couple of hundred feet from my skiff, and had settled down to actual fishing, day had dawned clear and bright. And all around us, even on the shoal behind where we anchored, tarpon were rolling. Large fish and many of them! They were light green on the back, showing they were fresh-run fish, just in from the sea. But slowly, painfully the dreadful certainty that they would not bite forced itself into my thrilling waiting consciousness.

THE tarpon, *Tarpon atlanticus*, is the most popular game fish of the Gulf States. In these waters it attains a length of seven feet and a weight of two hundred pounds, though but few of the large ones have been taken. It belongs to the hering family.

Like the salmon and the steelhead, the tarpon goes into fresh-water rivers to spawn. At least this spawning theory seems to be proved by the presence of small tarpon at the heads of all the Everglade rivers. But my own observation is that these small tarpon do not appear in great numbers, considering the number of adult tarpon. The boatmen of the west coast claim that a few tarpon remain at all seasons in these rivers; that the fish have been caught every month of the year. But

whether or not the same fish stay all year in these waters is something not yet ascertained. My opinion is that they do not.

Toward the end of March and in April the great schools of tarpon run in, out of the Gulf Stream, through the channels between the keys, across the fifty miles of shoals to the Everglade rivers. Bahia Honda Channel appears to be the route most used. Tarpon are caught there in May and June. An old fisherman of Key West told me he had seen a school of tarpon so large that it took all day to pass a given point.

Tarpon work into the mouths of the rivers according to tides. Mullet, crabs and small fish constitute their main food. They go in with the rising tide, into the myriads of little inlets and nooks among the mangroves. With the ebbing tide they return to drop into a deep channel or hole, then to wait for rising tide again. When they are congregated in a small area in such places at slack-water ebb or the early part of the flow, they are most easily caught. But, as Captain Thad averred, you can never be sure what tarpon will do.

BY COMPARISON with the tarpon fishing in Mexican waters I am afraid the Florida and Aransas Pass fishing loses a good deal. I fished several seasons at Tampico before the oil wells spoiled the Panuco River for angling. Between the stone jetties there was always a smooth swell rolling in from the sea, and a current coming in or passing out. I had many a wonderful day trolling in this fascinating and dangerous place.

I had many three-hour battles, not all of which resulted to my credit. Tarpon grow very large in Mexican waters. My largest was seven feet five inches in length and broad and thick, a humpbacked fish that would have weighed much over two hundred pounds. The longest I ever saw was seven feet ten inches. They reach even a greater length, but this one was the record for Tampico.

Next morning we were up even earlier, and on the fishing ground where we had located the tarpon, just a little after dawn.

R. C. was located near a small island where the channel appeared to form a deep eddy. Here dozens of tarpon were rolling. And very soon R. C. called out sharp and clear, "Something doing!"

A moment more and a splendid tarpon cleared the air, so brilliant and beautiful in the early morning sunlight that he seemed to come from some unreal and fairylike world. He was a big fish, and required careful handling.

R. C. had scarcely settled down to a comfortable seat when he had another strike. I saw it before he whistled. An instant later my line started out slow, strong, steady. As I picked up my rod Captain Thad said, "By gosh! There's a bite on your other rod!"

THE line on my extra rod was crossing the one I held. I felt the contact. My line ceased to pay out—then it whizzed off the reel. There followed a tremendous splash and a huge tarpon leaped so close to us that he made a great black blur against the sky. With a loud live crash he disappeared. And my line was limp!

"Just as well that happened. You've still got another bite," said Captain Thad.

I had again the same thrill of expectancy. When I struck hard and felt the heavy weight, the sudden lunge on the line, I stared as if fascinated at the space of water where the tarpon should show.

"Shark," said Thad. "Too bad! He ran across your other line and made the tarpon throw the hook."

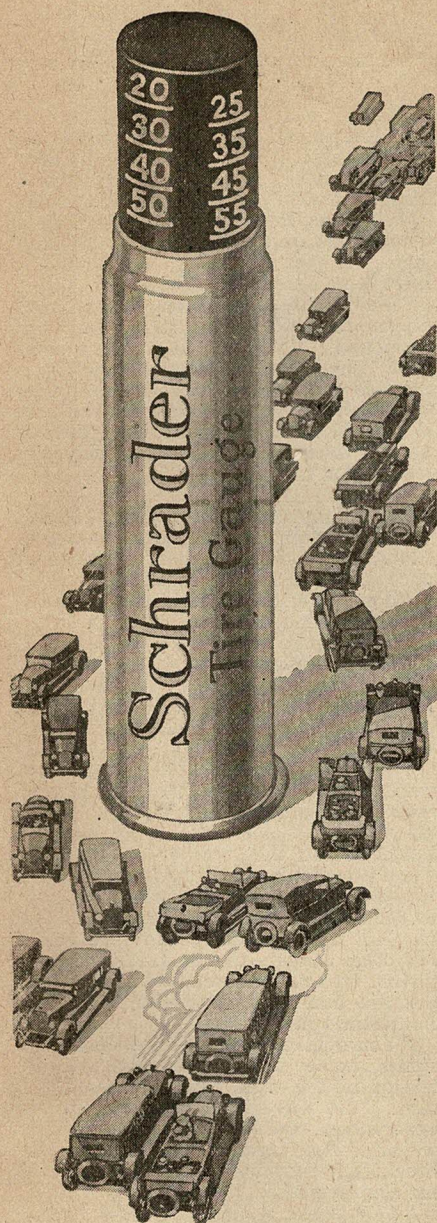
Before a sickening disappointment quite seized upon me I heard the unmistakable rapid flopping of a tarpon half out of the water. I had forgotten R. C. Wheeling, I was just in time to see a tarpon in a beautiful headlong dive.

R. C. managed to whip that fish and pull him in, without moving the boat.

The tarpon continued to roll and sport on the surface.

"Hey, come over here and take my rod," R. C. called gayly.

I saw him hook and begin to play a still larger tarpon. It made seven leaps clear of the surface, and then, after surging this way and that, turned toward our boat.



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Captain Thad wound in our lines, and was hauling on the anchor when the tarpon broke close to us. It was like the explosion of a shell. I snapped a picture with the camera focused for one hundred feet when the tarpon had leaped scarce twenty-five feet from us.

I was frantically changing my focus. I just had it done when the tarpon burst out of a caldron of white spray, and carrying up a wreath of foam and a rainbow mist and myriads of diamond drops, he went into the air until his tail was as high as my head. My camera snapped too late.

We watched R. C. handle him in masterly fashion and at length bring him in. Captain King had to gaff this fish.

"Biggest one yet!" called R. C. I did not see another tail or break for three hours. Captain Thad kept poling along into every likely nook he espied.

WE CAME to a narrow lane or rather opening in the green bank. We glided into a small cove, shallow and quiet.

"I see a buster over there," said Thad. "I see one over here," I replied.

"Yep. There's another in the middle—good big one too. All asleep!"

Not for moments did I espy the big tarpon Thad was gliding so carefully toward. When I did see him I gasped. He lay close to the bottom in several feet of water. I could scarcely believe this enormous shadow was really a fish.

Thad halted about twenty-five feet distant, and with slow deliberation, gently pushed his oar down into the sand.

He wound up the line until the leader was within a few inches of the tip; then he carefully balanced and swung the bait.

It hit with a plop and a splash, not right over the tarpon, but just in front of his nose. I saw him jerk his fins.

Then, to my exceeding amaze, he moved lazily and began to elevate his body. It shone gold. It loomed up to turn silver. His tail came out and flapped on the surface. It was a foot broad.

"He's got it," said Thad, handing the rod back to me.

A triangular wave appeared on the water. It swelled. I heard the faint cut of my line as it swept out. I saw it move. I saw that great tarpon clearly in sunlit water not over three feet deep. I saw the checker-board markings of his huge scales. I saw his lean, sharp snub-nosed face and the immense black eye. All as he reached a point even with me!

Then he saw the boat and no doubt Thad and me. Right before my rapt gaze he vanished. Next I heard a quick deep thrum. I saw a boiling cloud of muddy water rising toward the surface.

"He saw the boat!" yelled Thad. "He's scared. Soak him!"

BUT swift as a flash though I was I could not throw on the drag and reel in the slack line and strike in time.

The very center of that placid cove upheaved in a flying maelstrom, and there followed a roaring crash. A grand blazing fish leaped into the sunlight. He just cleared the water, so heavy was he, and seemed to hang for an instant in the air, a strange creature of the sea. He shook with such tremendous power that he blurred in my sight. I saw the bait go flying far.

With sounding smash he fell back. The water opened into a dark surging hole, out of which flew muddy spray. With a solid heavy thrum, almost like a roar of contending waters, the tarpon was gone. He left a wake that I shall never forget.

On the moment, as I recovered from what seemed a stunning check to my emotions, I did not feel the slightest pang. Instead, as the primitive thrills of the chase and capture and the sudden paralyzing shock of fear and loss passed away together, I experienced a perfect exhilaration.

Something wonderful had happened. I had seen something indescribably beautiful. Into my memory had been burned indelibly a picture of a sunlit, cloud-mirroring green-and-gold-bordered cove, above the center of which shone a glorious fish-creature in the air, wildly instinct with the action and daring of freedom.

When I laid my rod down and took my chair, motioning to Captain Thad that we would go, I knew I had reached the end of this fishing trip. There is always an end to everything, even the longest lane.

If I fished only to capture fish my fishing trips would have ended long ago.

EDITOR'S NOTE—This is the last of five articles by Mr. Grey on Florida fishing.

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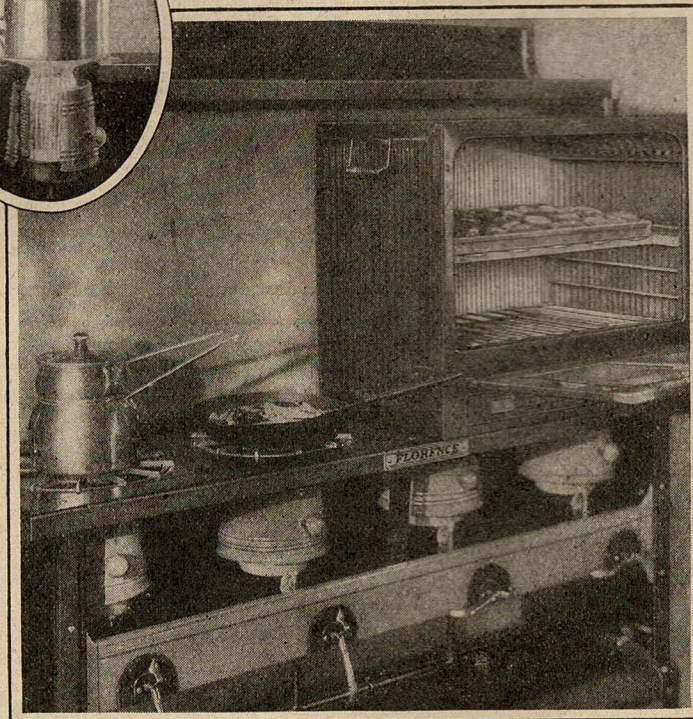
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