Challenges and Delights: Fishing the Susquehanna at Steelton in 1943

by D. W. McGary

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A view of the Susquehanna in 2006, taken by the author from the boat-launch ramp on which he begins his story.

When the water is perfect, the late evening air warm and pleasant, and you still have energy to keep at it, it is very hard to accept the reality that you are just not going to catch anything. And when that happens, you either pack it in and go home, or you find something else to do along the river. Not so long ago, on a perfect evening in July while fishing along the Susquehanna, I admitted defeat, sat on a rock with my feet dangling in the water, reeled in my line, took off the fly, and headed for the shoreline.

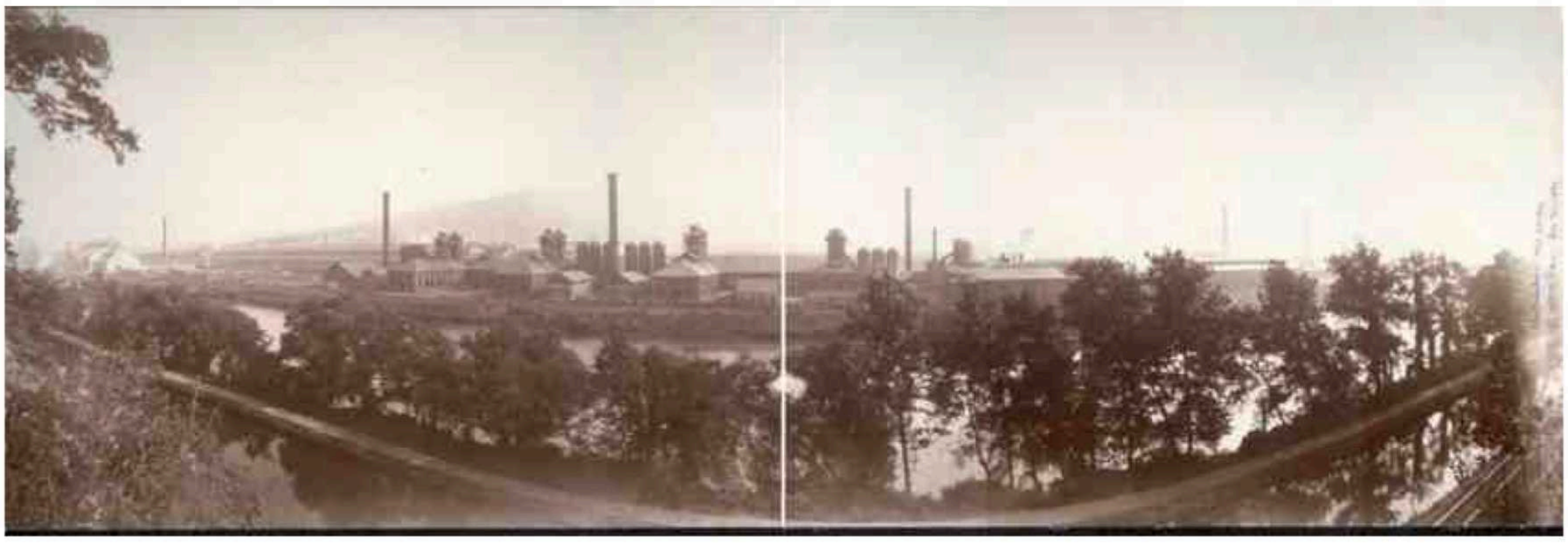
I had been fly fishing, wet wading in the pockets of water among ledges that extend out from the west shore of the river, about a mile downstream from the I-83 bridge leading into Harrisburg and about 6 miles upstream from the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant. The ledges are a couple of hundred yards upstream from a boat-launch ramp and parking area.

In the middle of summer, the launch area is a busy place. Not only do people put their boats in there, others come down to the shoreline and fish off the large rocks that line the edge of the water. Some people come there and just sit on folding chairs alongside the ramp or skip flat stones over the water or go wading. There is almost always someone there to talk to or something to watch, and I expected to find some diversion there before going home.

For the most part, after people launch their boats at the ramp, they go off downstream toward the Pennsylvania Turnpike Bridge a mile away where, it is generally believed, the fishing is better than it is upstream toward Harrisburg. But some anglers do go upstream for a half mile or more in a channel just offshore from the ledges, then drift downstream and fish along the way. No boats venture into the quiet water between the ledges, where I always fish.

As I got about 10 yards from the launch ramp, a boat gradually emerged on the ramp. It was being backed down on a trailer behind a huge, immaculately clean, shiny-black SUV. The boat was at least 16 feet long, black fiberglass, flecked with metallic gold. On the back of the boat was a 225-horsepower outboard motor, and there was a large electric motor on the bow. Sticking up along the sides of a central console were six fishing rods, each already rigged with a different kind of lure. Once the trailer had been backed into the river, a man and a boy got out of the SUV and soon had the boat floating free.

While the boy held the boat at the shoreline by a bow line, the man drove the SUV up the ramp to the parking lot. In a couple of minutes he returned, got into the boat, sat at the console, fired up the motor, and in another two or three minutes the boat was roaring downstream toward the Turnpike Bridge.



The Bethlehem Steel Works, ca. 1896.
Panoramic photographs collection, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, pan1993001131/PP.

I watched as the boat became smaller and smaller and eventually disappeared in the distance. And as it did, it carried me with it, back into a time when I was about the age of the boy in the boat, a time when there was a world war going on, when there was no Turnpike Bridge, when there were no fiberglass boats and no SUVs.

You Could Hardly Get There from There

Directly across the ¼-mile-wide Susquehanna from the boat launch, the town of Steelton lies on hillsides rising from the eastern shore of the river. I grew up in Steelton, and from where I fish among the ledges on the west shore, I can look across and see the large brick school building that still stands across the street from the house in which I grew up. Through binoculars, I can see the house itself.

When I was about the age of the boy at the ramp, about eleven or twelve, the year was 1943. Our family at the time consisted of my mother and father, two sisters and me, my mother's father and mother, and a great-grandmother. Our home was in half of a double three-story house three blocks up a steep hill from the main street through town—really a section of Route 230, which generally paralleled the Susquehanna and connected Lancaster and cities farther east with Harrisburg. Steelton owed its existence to the Bethlehem Steel plant, which extended almost 3 miles along the river, the whole length of the town, except for a few blocks at the northern end. Located as it was, the steel plant effectively isolated the town from the river.

From the upriver end of Steelton, a mile-long series of warehouses, businesses, and other establishments connected the town with the central area of Harrisburg. All of these buildings were located between the river and Route 230 and residential areas of Harrisburg on hillsides to the east, thus separating that whole section of Harrisburg and Route 230 from the river.

The downriver end of both the steel plant and Steelton was at the town of Highspire, where the Turnpike Bridge now crosses the river. Highspire continued for another 2 miles downstream along the river to where it ended at what are now the runways at Harrisburg International Airport. In 1943, though, HIA did not exist; instead, Olmsted Air Force Base occupied the grounds there. The town of Middletown then extended from the downstream end of the airport runways another mile along the river. The Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, built long after 1943, sits on an island in the Susquehanna about 2 miles farther downstream from Middletown.

In addition to the businesses and industries running along the river from Middletown to Harrisburg, the main tracks of the Pennsylvania Railroad lay on a roadbed above the floodplain not far inshore from the river. Even in the few sections of the towns where the industries were not densely concentrated and several streets reached to the tracks, crossing the tracks to get to the river was dangerous, and the few crossing points were guarded as part of wartime defense. Of course, the railroads were private property; crossing them was trespassing.

The geography of the area and the locations of businesses, industries, and the railroads in 1943 made getting to the Susquehanna to fish a challenge. Even today, the corridor from Middletown to Harrisburg remains mostly isolated from the river by the same set of factors that existed in 1943. But other conditions have greatly changed, especially the wartime restrictions and the complications that they created for simple activities, like fishing.

For someone living in Steelton who wanted to fish in the nearby Susquehanna and who did not want to risk injury, arrest, or being shot at a railroad crossing, there were two access points. One was at Harrisburg, and the other was at the lower end of Highspire, where the Olmsted Air Force Base runways began. However, reaching those points just to get to the water required transportation, and there were few options. One option was to walk, but from the middle of Steelton, the walk was a minimum of 3 miles, and the need to carry everything to fish with over that distance and back discouraged all but the truly desperate from walking. A second option was to use the bus line, which ran the whole way from Middletown to Harrisburg. The third option was to drive. World War II was a deciding factor in making a choice.

We had a car, but during the war, gasoline was rationed and its use restricted in terms of how it related to the war effort. "Nonessential" meant uses not linked directly or indirectly to fighting the war. Owners of cars used for nonessential basic day-to-day living were give an "A" sticker to put on the windshield, indicating to service stations that only about 4 gallons of gas a week could be purchased.

A gasoline rationing "A" sticker. Farm Security Administration—Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USE6-D-004667.

Pleasure driving, including driving somewhere to fish, was definitely nonessential.

Of course, someone could drive up to Harrisburg, park along the river, and fish. But both rationing and gas use were strongly enforced, and a car with an A sticker parked along the river and with someone fishing nearby would have been a red flag waving to attract the authorities. We had an A sticker, and we did not drive to go fishing.

The continuity of industries, businesses, and the railroads along the route from Middletown to Harrisburg precluded walking over to the river from town. Distances from Steelton to Harrisburg or to Highspire mainly ruled out walking to an access point. Gas rationing eliminated driving. Buses, then, provided the best way to get around the restrictions and gain access to the river at Harrisburg or below Highspire. But then the state of the river itself became a discouraging reality.

It was generally accepted by many at the time that fishing along the eastern shore or in the eastern half of the Susquehanna from the lower end of Harrisburg downstream through Highspire would be a waste of time, if not a threat to health.

Above Harrisburg to the north and east lay anthracite coal mines in the ridges and valleys of the mountains running east-west out to the Pocono Plateau. The coal fueled many of the industries that were running at capacity during the war. With little regulation in effect or observed, mining provided a constant flow of coal to run wartime factories, and it produced a constant flow of coal dust into the Susquehanna watershed, producing fine deposits of black silt over the beds of streams and the Susquehanna. Although not directly poisonous, the silt created an unnatural environment for plants and animals while, at the same time, other effluents from mining further degraded the watershed. Mining, however, was only one contributing factor to the condition of the water.

Industries and municipalities all along the main stem of the Susquehanna and its tributaries contributed a wide range of contaminants to the water. Combined with the effluents from the mines, these additions produced a cumulative effect that seemed to be very pronounced in the river as it flowed along the Harrisburg–Steelton–Highspire shoreline and the eastern half of the river. Although the water appeared unpolluted—except when raw sewage sometimes floated in it—it was not amenable to most common species of plant and animal life. The overall result was an ecosystem consisting of hardy bottom feeders and minimal plant life. Along much of the eastern stretch of river from Harrisburg to Middletown, the river was a wasteland of sorts, both aesthetically and physically.

For someone living in Steelton, fishing the nearby Susquehanna for something edible in 1943 was limited to two options. The first was to take a bus to Harrisburg, walk the mile across the Market Street Bridge to get to the unpolluted west shoreline, and fish there; but that meant walking back across the bridge later and taking the bus back home. For various reasons, this was an option we took sometimes, but fishing was limited to the shallow, mostly unproductive water along the rocky shoreline.

The Rockville Bridge spanning the Susquehanna River, north of I-81. Historic American Engineering Record, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, HAER PA, 22-ROCVI, 1.

The second option was to get a boat, cross the eastern wasteland to the clean west half of the river, and fish there. But because there was no access between Harrisburg and the Olmstead Air Force Base, using a boat meant either keeping one tied up at Harrisburg or at a point somewhere below Steelton. We had a boat.

Bass Tracker, circa 1943

The boat was 12 feet long and 4 feet wide at the middle, 2 feet at the square ends, and not more than a foot deep. It was made of pine planks and was painted green. There was a seat in the stern, one in the middle (where there were oarlocks), and one at the bow. It was the standard river fishing boat design at the time.

The boat had belonged to someone who lived near the Rockville Bridge, about 4 miles north of Harrisburg. I remember my father and grandfather periodically discussing its purchase over a period of weeks and then finally scraping up the 4 dollars to pay for it.

For some practical reasons that will be clear later, it was agreed to keep the boat at the lower end of Highspire, at White House Lane, the upstream end of Olmsted Air Force Base. This meant, of course, that the boat north of Harrisburg at Rockville had to be moved to Highspire, a distance of about 15 miles. There was only one way to make the move.

One day in June, my father and I took a bus to the far end of Harrisburg. We took along a pair of oars, a length of chain, a lock, and some rope. From the end of the bus line, we walked to Rockville, paid for the boat, and launched it. We then drifted downstream to the south end of Harrisburg, where we stopped a hundred yards or so upstream from the Dock Street Dam. The dam has remained to this day a dangerous spot on the river, with a history full of accidents and drownings. Our only choice at the dam was to pull the boat out of the water and carry it around the dam, which we were able to do because the boat was not large and was made of light wood. The portage was uneventful.

From Harrisburg, we drifted down on the polluted water past Steelton and Highspire to where a few other boats were tied up along the shore at White House Lane. There, we pulled the boat up onto the shore, chained it to a tree, carried the oars a quarter mile over White House Lane to a house, where we left them with a relative. We then caught a bus back to Steelton.

From that time on, all we needed to do to fish in the river was get from Steelton to White House Lane in Highspire.

Susquehanna River Fishing Guide

My opportunities to go fishing depended entirely on the availability of someone who could take me. However, my father and grandfather both worked for Bethlehem Steel and were, it seemed, always at work—especially my father, who worked a rotation of three different eight-hour shifts. But there was someone else in my life who was a quietly fanatic

fisherman and who was not tied up by a demanding job. He was my other (my paternal) grandfather, and he lived nearby, just two blocks up the hill from our house.

My family was always very reluctant to talk about its members. In that way it was more typical than different from many families in those days. Whatever secrets were considered too dark to bring to light remained in darkness forever. The best I could ever find out about this grandfather was that he and my other grandmother had separated for some reason and lived apart. Questions about the separation were met with silence, then and always.

Parker was my grandfather's first name, but for some reason everyone called him Cy. In 1943 he worked as the custodian at the church our family attended. This was his only job, and it left him relatively poor financially but blessed richly with flexibility for pursuing his interests: mainly fishing and hunting. With virtually no limitations, he was able to find or create opportunities to go fishing.

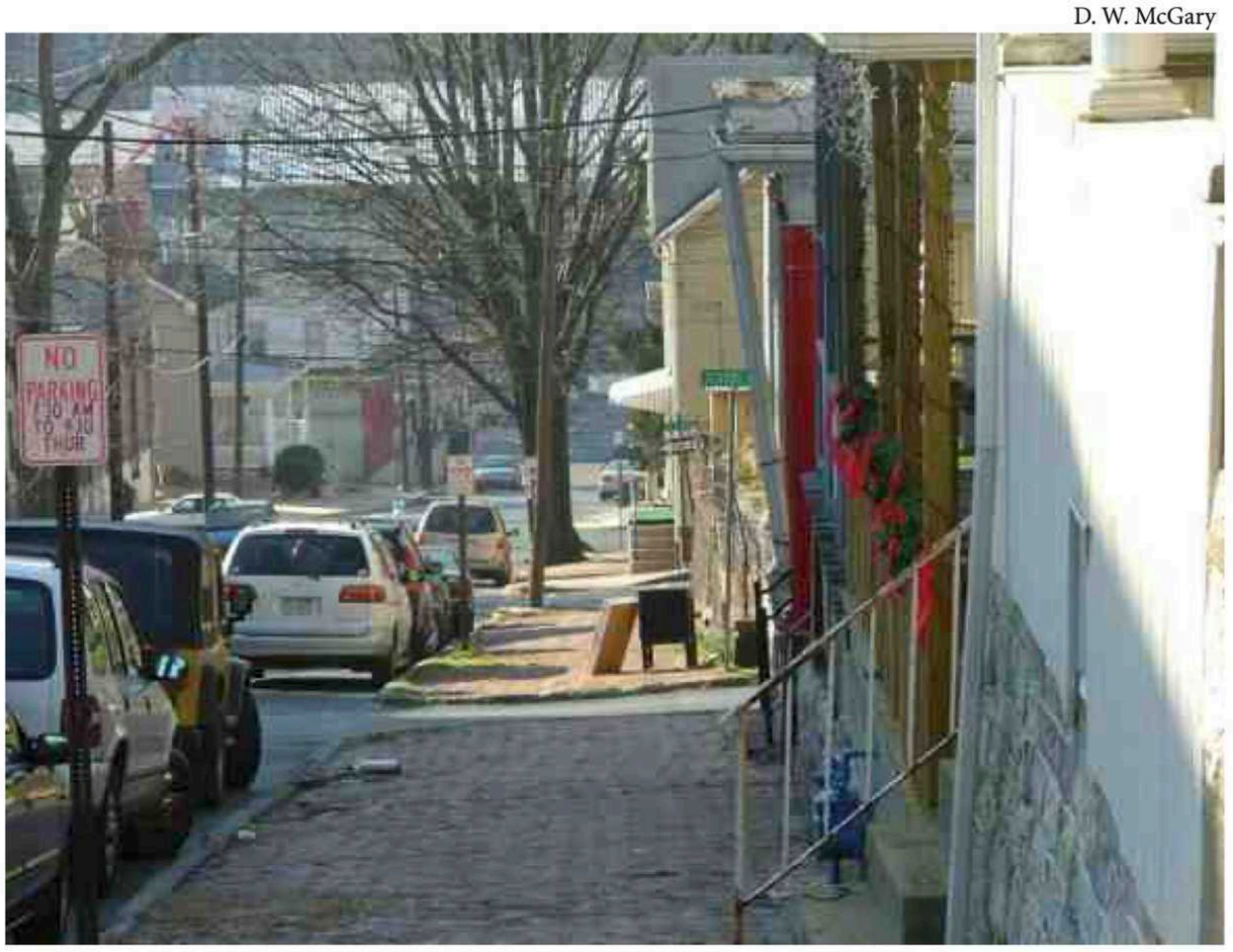
People tend to give children names to call adults, especially relatives, and the name they gave me for Parker was Pappy Cy. I suppose this name worked for me back in my early years, but I just can't refer to him that way now. I remember him better as just Cy, quiet, tall, gangly, someone who could have been the model for old pen-and-ink drawings of Ichabod Crane.

Cy lived very conservatively in a small two-room apartment. He cooked a lot of meals for himself in the basement of the church, but sometimes he ate with us. He never had a driver's license. He got around town and elsewhere very well by walking, riding buses, or getting rides with someone who had a car. I became a beneficiary of his skills, experience, and ability to get around, especially when it came to fishing in the Susquehanna.

Whenever Cy had plans to go fishing, he would stop by the house a couple of days ahead of time to see if anyone was interested. For the most part, that really meant me, because my father and other grandfather were seldom available. I was usually interested, and on the appointed day, I would be ready, waiting for him to come down the hill to get me.

And, one day in July, we went fishing.

D. W. McGary



The view from the author's childhood home, looking down the hill toward the main street.

A Summer Day on the Susquehanna

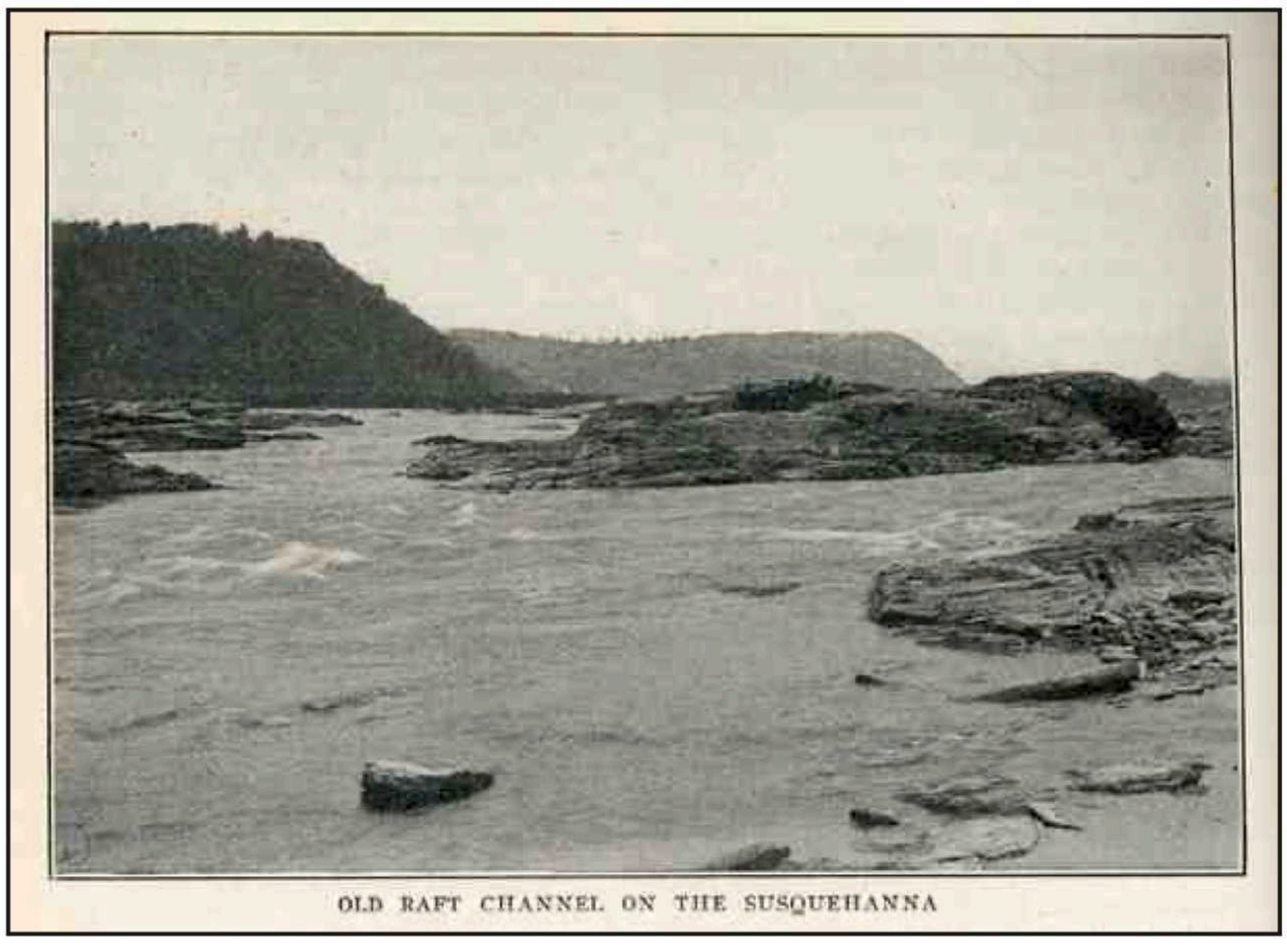
I was waiting for him out on the front porch.

About eight o'clock, Cy came down the hill, carrying his rods and a tackle box. Over his shoulder he had a creel. He had on his lucky felt fishing hat, wore a blue long-sleeved shirt, a pair of black pants, and black sneakers. After stopping for me and getting all my things together, including a lunch my mother had packed and a can of worms, we walked the three blocks down the steep hill to Front Street where, after a short wait, we got on a bus for the ride down to the end of Highspire, to White House Lane where we kept the boat. With all the stops through town, the ride took about a half hour.

At the end of the main street in Highspire, at White House Lane, there was a corner house in which Cy's estranged wife—my plump, warm grandmother Bess—lived. Bess was always glad to see us—mainly me, I believe. When she came out to meet us, she engulfed me and smothered me with kisses and hugs.

We stayed there long enough for Cy to have a cup of coffee and for both of us to have a toasted piece of homemade bread. A lot of my curiosity about Bess and Cy was fueled by this kind of seemingly amicable visit, but there was no point in bringing it up. Besides, the visits there were more than social; there was a very practical reason for stopping at Grandmother Bess's house.

It was at Grandmother Bess's house that my father and I had left the oars



From Charles M. Mansfield, "Camping on the Susquehanna," Field and Stream, *June 1909, 140.*

when we floated the boat down from Rockville. Since then, a wooden pole and two bait nets had been added, along with a special bucket for live bait. The pole was about 12 feet long with a metal sleeve at one end and was used to push the boat through the water when we did not row. The oars, pole, and nets were all vital to a fishing trip; therefore, we had to make a stop to get them. But I remember the stops more because of Grandma Bess.

After picking up the pole, bait bucket, oars, and nets, and the things we had brought from home, we walked across White House Lane toward the river, a quarter mile away. The road was paved part of the way, then gave way to gravel, and then turned into dirt and sand before passing under the railroad tracks close to the river. At the river we began the process of getting the boat ready for launching.

Travails of Launching: Good Days and Bad Days

We kept our boat fastened to a long chain locked to a ring stone, a block of concrete with an eyebolt embedded in it. The chain was long enough to cover the distance from the ring stone to the water. To keep floorboards from drying out and opening up at seams, boats kept along the shoreline were left floating, rather than turned over, even though rainstorms sometimes half filled them. A drop in the river level over a period of time, however, could leave a boat sitting up dry, away from the water's edge. It was everyone's hope that their boats would be floating or at least partially in water when going fishing there. The makeup of the shoreline was the reason for this hope.

The shore area, from inland at the railroad tracks, consisted first of a low hilly area overgrown with grasses and shrubs. Next there was a gentle slope of sand, coal silt, and river gravel. The ideal situation was for the water to be in on shore as far as the gravel so that the boat was mostly in water and could be pulled up onto the solid gravel, loaded, manned, and pushed off into the river. A launch from the gravel usually took five minutes at the most.

But in midsummer, when the river ran low, boats left floating at the edge of the gravel after one fishing trip were sometimes found stranded on the last outward section of the shore days or weeks later. And that was a problem.

Parker "Cy" McGary, circa 1943.
From the collection of D. W. McGary.

Under very low water conditions, a stranded boat would be sitting on a strip of something that resembled tar, but which was a lot more than tar. It had the consistency of tar, but if disturbed by stepping into it or throwing a rock into it, noxious-looking bubbles and odors burst out of it, and the nearby water become iridescent. It was generally assumed that much of this material was a by-product of manufacturing, especially from the upriver steel plant. Regardless of its source, the tar layer was unpleasant and difficult to deal with when launching a boat. Launching from the tar took much more than five minutes and required ingenuity and even a degree of bravery.

We found our boat sitting up on the tar.

After unlocking the boat and two homemade anchors from the ring stone, we found a plank and two large flat stones to serve as a walkway over the tar to the boat. After putting these in place, we made two very careful trips out to the boat with our equipment, the anchors, and everything else. Then we got into the boat, distributed everything, and prepared to get the boat off the tar.

Cy had me sit on the backseat in order to put weight on the end of the boat closer to the water in the hope that doing so would take weight off the tar. He stood up on the middle seat and started to push with the pole, causing bubbles and odors to rise from the tar. The boat did not move an inch. Then he went to the front seat and pushed from there. Again there was no movement. He turned and motioned to me to do what was the absolute last resort under these conditions, something I had done before and dreaded.

Cy got up on the backseat. I took off my shoes and socks and rolled up my pants above my knees, eased off the front of the boat, and got into the warm tar. Bubbles and odors rose to the surface. I sank down a foot or so until I was on something solid—probably gravel—and then started to push on the boat while Cy used the pole. The boat began to slide off the tar, and I reached out to grab hold so that I could pull myself on board, an action I had perfected from other launchings of this kind. But my grip failed this time, and the boat, with Cy in the back, slid out into the water leaving me stranded in the goo. Cy, laughing, motioned for me to walk through the tar toward the water. He got the boat pointed at me and brought it up to the edge of the tar. Fighting the suction the tar exerted on me as I struggled through it, I got to the boat, leaned over the front end, and pulled myself partly on board.

There was an understanding on fishing trips that tar was to be kept off the inside of the boat, so after getting half of myself on board, I sat facing front with my feet and lower legs hanging over the edge in the water. I stayed in this position until Cy got us almost halfway across the river and pushed the boat up onto a grass patch. At the grass patch, the two of us used sand, coal silt, and gravel to scrub off the tar.

Riding like that out to the grass patch meant that I was letting my feet and lower legs trail through the polluted east half of the river. Over the years I have achieved a certain peace of mind by believing it is

A 1943 wooden fishing boat of the type often seen moored along the Susquehanna. From the collection of D. W. McGary.

true, as I have heard it said, that over time the human body constantly grows new skin and replaces the old. I continue to cling to this belief and assume that after more than sixty years I am fully rid of whatever I may have picked up in the La Brea Tar Pit at Highspire and in the eastern wasteland of the Susquehanna on those days when we had really bad launches.

Susquehanna Gondolier

Although we had oars, we seldom used them. Instead, to get around on the river, Cy or my father (when he was with us) stood on the backseat and used the long pole to push the boat through the water. Few people who fished from boats when the water was at its normal summertime levels used anything other than a pole to get around. The method was preferred over rowing, especially because it let the poler see ahead, unlike rowing "backward" from the middle seat. But it was also more effective than rowing in terms of making quick changes in direction and in avoiding rocks and other obstructions. Someone skilled in the poling art could quickly change directions, bring the boat to a stop, or keep it going in a straight line upstream, downstream, or at any angle to the current. Cy and my father tried to teach me how to pole once I got older, but I never really learned it. I could only get the boat to move a few yards ahead before it would start turning irreversibly, and someone would have to take over. Even in later years, when I had a boat of my own, I could never make poling work.

Preliminaries: Catching Bait

Cy was a live bait fisherman in 1943. Years later he became converted to some extent to using lures, and even later he took up fly fishing, but he always preferred live bait: anything from worms to crayfish to minnows to hellgrammites, things that lived in or around the Susquehanna.

Except for worms, which we dug up at a dump outside of town, other live bait had to be caught on the river. Even if we could have gotten live bait in Steelton, transporting it on a hot bus without air-conditioning in midsummer and then carrying it across White House Lane in the sun to the river was out of the question if live bait were to remain live. Each trip out on the river, then, meant spending close to an hour getting live bait.

Cy's favorite live bait were shiners, 3-inch minnows that flashed reflected sunlight when they darted around in the water. They tended to concentrate in the water close to grass patches, something well known to fishermen and bass.

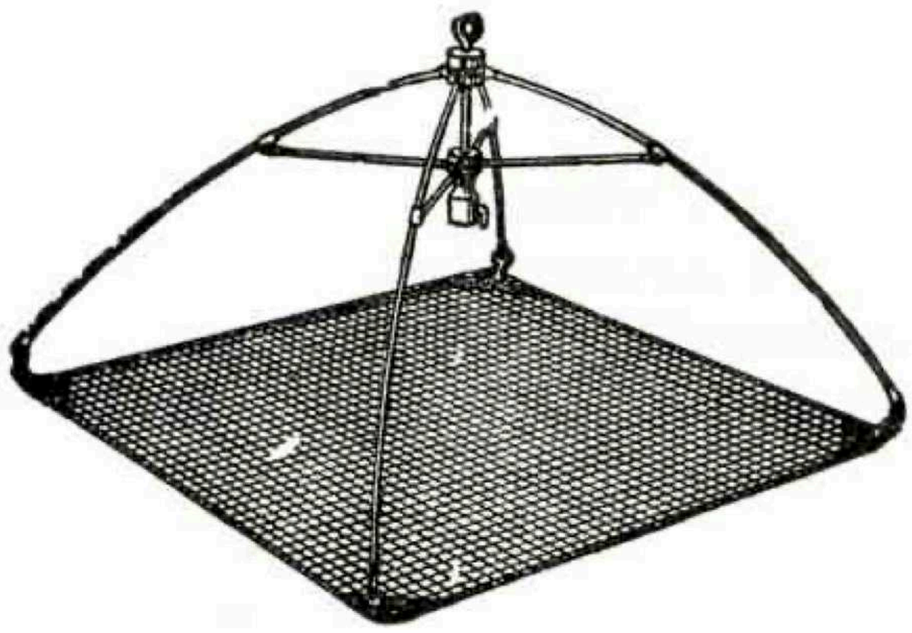
Once we had cleared the miasma of the shoreline and east half of the river and scoured the tar off me, we got on with the serious business of netting some bait. Cy unwound the dip net we had with us and attached the four corners to the ends of the metal frame, which had a rope attached to it in the center. Wading along the grass growing in about 2 feet of water, he gradually lowered the net by its rope to the bottom, and then we both took up positions 10 feet or so upstream from the net.

He had made a ball of dough the day before, adding a little vanilla for flavor. We pulled off pieces from the dough ball and tossed them into the water upstream from the net so that the little balls drifted down over the net as they sank. Almost instantly shiners began to attack the dough balls, and when Cy felt enough shiners were above the net, he pulled it up quickly, trapping most of them. Then we picked off the largest of the catch and put them into the bait bucket, which was kept hanging from the side of the boat in water deep enough to allow fresh water to enter it all the time through screened openings. Once Cy felt we had enough shiners, he disassembled the net and wound it up, and we got back into the boat for the next bait stop.

From the grass patch, Cy poled us across to the west shore, where we beached the boat and got out into the shallow water. Our prey at this stop were crayfish, or as everyone in those days called them, "crabs." We had a special net for catching the crabs. It was stretched over a D-shaped frame with a handle about 4 feet long. The net looked a lot like a butterfly net, except that the mesh was about half inch, which allowed water to flow freely through it but still trapped the crabs and other creatures.

Cy put the net into the water so that the flat part of the D rested on the bottom. Then he waded upstream, pushing the net ahead of him through the mud and gravel on the bottom and through the thick growth of plants growing up from the bottom. This was not subtly done. The objective was to disrupt the peace and quiet of the river and panic all creatures living there to try to escape ahead of the oncoming net. After scooping ahead this way for about 10 feet, he lifted the net up out of the water and took it to the shore, where he laid it out so that we could examine its contents.

I loved this part of bait catching because there were so many different kinds of larvae, salamanders, frogs,



A dip net. From the Edward vom Hofe and Company Incorporated catalog, 1940.

shelled creatures, leeches, and small fish that got trapped and lay there flapping, crawling, or wriggling on the wet net. To me, each new netting was like opening a present. There was always the possibility that something totally new and exotic would be there to discover wriggling around among the usual critters. Cy's perspective on each catch was different. He was only interested in crabs, especially the "soft shells" that had recently molted and were deadly bass bait.

From each netting he selected what he wanted, added it to the bait bucket, then emptied everything else back in the water. As soon as he felt that we had enough crabs, he put the net in the boat, we got in, and he pushed us off to go fishing—finally.

To give a sense of time about one of these fishing trips, once we had finished with the bait gathering, it would be long past the middle of the morning, heading into the steaming hot hours of a midsummer day. And by this time we would not have tried to catch anything larger than a minnow or a crayfish.

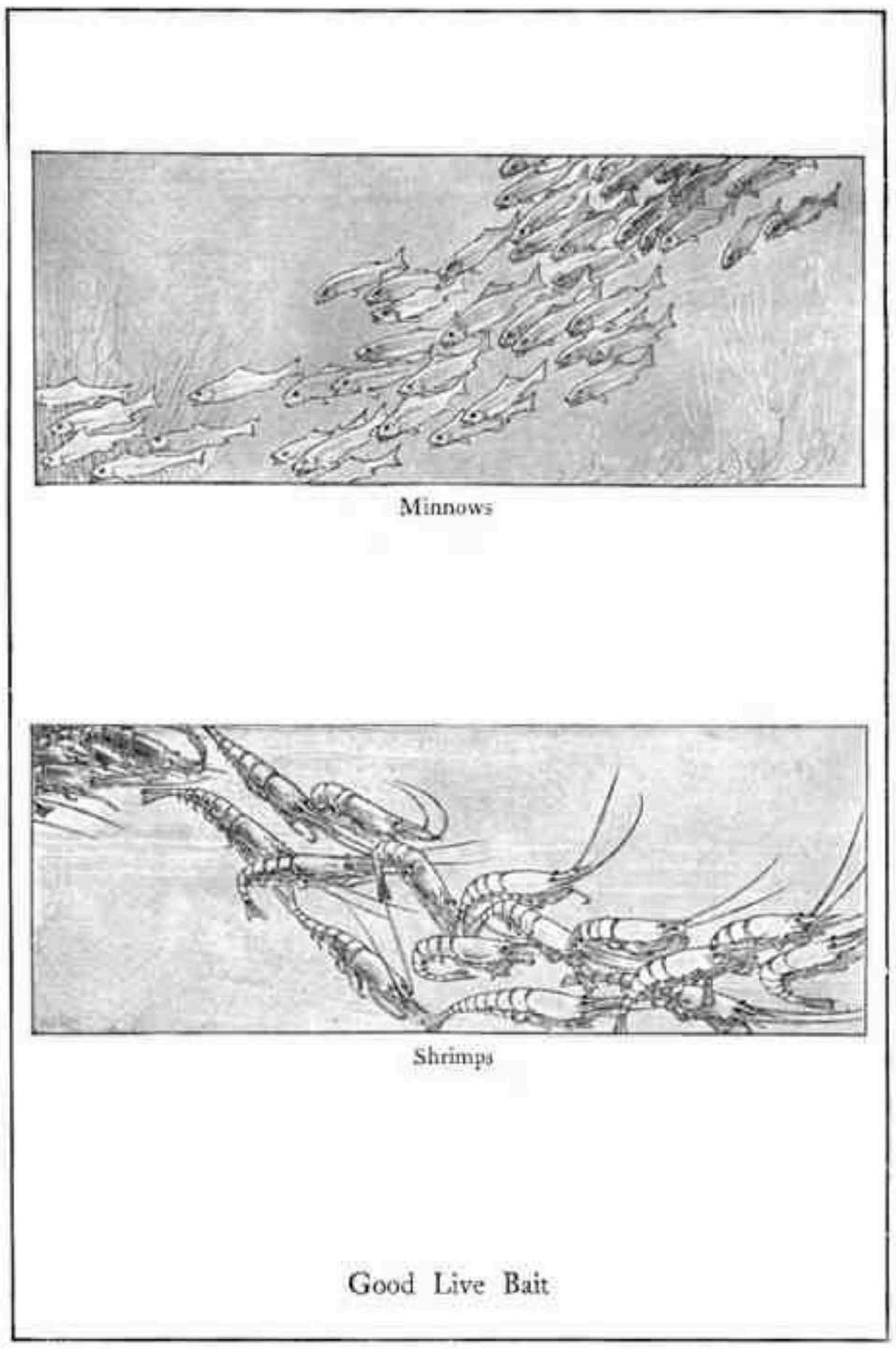
Lining Up for the Kill

Cy knew every rock, submerged log, ledge, and fishing hole for more than a mile along the west half of the river across from White House Lane. We never fished very far downstream, especially late in the day, because it would mean having to pole up against the current, using time and energy we couldn't spare for our trip back across the river in the evening. Usually Cy would pole us upstream about a quarter mile or so, and then we would drift downstream in intervals, stopping at different special places to fish. For the most part, we fished offshore several hundred yards, out in the current away from the shallow, quiet pockets of water that lay between the many ledges extending out from the shoreline.

From the crabbing spot, Cy poled us upstream through the current until he reached a point he recognized from landmarks only he seemed to know. There, he began the coordinated maneuvers that put us into position to fish.

First, he turned the boat so that it was perpendicular to the current and was drifting downstream. At another landmark, he told me to get ready. I knew what was coming, having done all this many times before.

We each had an anchor beside us and now put them up on the upstream edge of our seats. At the right moment, Cy said "Now!," and we lowered the anchors into the water and let the anchor ropes play out until we heard and felt the anchors hit bottom, usually 4 or 5 feet down. Then we tightened the ropes and tied them fast. The result was a boat held in place across the current by the two anchors on the upstream side.



Minnows

Shrimps

Good Live Bait

From Louis Rhead, Bait Angling for Common Fishes *(New York: The Outing Publishing Company, 1907), facing page 76.*

Most of the time when we tried to anchor this way, it worked fine. Sometimes, though, one anchor would not grab hold, and the boat would start turning. But usually by letting the other anchor rope out a little more, the boat would come horizontal again, and eventually both anchors would be fast on the bottom. Seldom would one anchor not hold at all, and in those cases we had to give up and start again farther downstream. It would have been easy to anchor just one end of the boat and have it oriented with the current. The reason we did not do it that way had a lot to do with how we fished.

Laws of Physics and Limited Technology

In 1943, our fishing rods were made of metal, hardwood, or bamboo. No fiberglass, no graphite. One rod I used for a while was made from a pool cue, but on my trips with Cy, the rods were steel. Mine was one piece, about 5 feet long; Cy had two, one telescoping from 4 to 8 feet, the other about 8 feet long, in three sections. Our reels were freewheeling, without any level winding mechanism or brakes, and the lines were Cuttyhunk, strong and thick. Casting from the reel was not something any sane person would consider trying. Our method of getting a live-baited hook to the bottom downstream was a combination of applied mathematics, laws of physics, and a high level of natural or acquired eye-hand-muscle-nerve coordination.

After we got anchored securely, we rigged the rods for action, tying on catgut-snelled hooks and adding a length of line with a lead sinker. Once rigged, the hooks were baited with a shiner or crab. Cy usually put a shiner on one of his hooks and a crab on the other. He almost always had me put on a crab to start. He usually put his two lines out before mine.

Standing in his end of the boat, Cy laid one of his rods across the boat near the middle seat, the tip pointing downstream. He laid the baited hook and sinker on the seat and then started pulling line out through the end of the rod and coiling it loosely next to him on the bottom of the boat. Although I had no idea how far downstream the fish were supposed to be, Cy seemed to know, and he pulled enough line out to reach that distance. Then, standing facing the shore and away from the coil of line on the bottom, he took hold of the line about a foot up from the baited hook and sinker, spit on the bait for luck, and started to swing it in a circle parallel to the current. When his instincts told him the force had built up sufficiently, he let go of the line, and the baited, sinkered hook sailed up and out in a graceful arc that landed the bait in the water with a loud splash.

After putting his other line in the water the same way, he put mine in at my end of the boat. We then had three rods pointed downstream, propped on the downstream edge of the boat, one at

each end and one about the middle, with the lines downstream in the water and separated far enough from each other to avoid getting crossed if something was hooked. Then we sat and waited.

This was a common technique that many people used to get weighted bait downstream from a boat or out into a stream from the shoreline. I was given a lot of instruction on this centrifugal insertion technique, but I never really mastered it. Occasionally things worked out, but more often the bait and sinker would ricochet downstream like a pebble skipped over the surface, or it would rocket in with a great splash a yard or two downstream, or my release would send things into a near vertical flight that ended with the bait and sinker plummeting back down into the water only a foot downstream (or even worse, upstream), or if I happened to be standing on part of the coil of line on the bottom of the boat, the hook and sinker would snap back after flying a yard or so and hit the side of the boat or me. Cy often simply did it for me, as he did this time, probably feeling safer that way. And I did not mind.

Besides being awful at it, I didn't like centrifugal insertion fishing because it usually resulted in long, long periods of waiting for something to happen downstream out of sight. My preference was to bait my line with a worm, without a sinker, put a cork on the line a couple of feet higher up on the line, and let the line out slowly 10 or 15 feet from the boat. The river was full of fish that liked worms, and I enjoyed a lot of action while Cy sat and sat and sat and waited for something to happen. Mostly I caught sunfish and rock bass, but occasionally I would get a small bass that had to be tossed back in or even a turtle. Cy was not interested in little things. He was after legal-size bass or a walleye, a catfish, an eel, anything. He fished for food, the way most people did then. Sport was all right, the overall aesthetic experience was fine, but taking something home was what counted. If it was legally big enough to keep, it was kept and eventually eaten, and I contributed almost everything legal I caught, no matter its size, to the fish bag that we hung over the side.

The Butterfly Spring

Usually, after two or three downstream floats, it would be time to eat the lunch that my mother had packed for us: sandwiches, pieces of fruit, sometimes a piece of candy. For something to drink, we always had a canteen of water with us, but it was not insulated, and the water in it became heated in the sun so that it served only to prevent us from drying up, but left much to be desired in the way of taste. Warm as the water was, though, we had usually drunk it all by the time we were ready to eat.

After three drifts, anchorings, centrifugal insertions, and no catches, we pulled up the anchors, and Cy guided us downstream, where we parked the boat at a small opening among the big rocks on the shoreline. Real water awaited us.

The spring was in small dense woods on the slope of a hill 50 or so yards up from the edge of the river at the end of a path. Crude steps that cut into the bank beyond the spring led to the top of the hill, where a dilapidated cottage stood. We never saw people there. Someone, though, kept a metal cup at the spring, and we used it to drink and drink and drink. There is no taste in the world like cold springwater drunk from a metal cup in the middle of the day in summer after sitting for hours in a boat.

The spring in the woods was a magical place. The rocks around it were heavy with dark green moss, no matter how hot and dry things were elsewhere. There was a special odor of cool wetness that filled the air around it. Everything was soft to walk on. There were always spotted salamanders in the spring, and sometimes frogs among the grasses, and wildflowers close to the water. And there were always butterflies fluttering around or sipping from the moist stones and moss. Black-and-yellow-striped swallowtails, others dark blue with yellow and orange spots, orange checkered ones, pale yellow ones, bright whites. I liked to get down on my knees close to them and watch them uncoil their tongues to sip, and sometimes one would land on the back of my hand or arm and rest there probing, searching so lightly I couldn't feel it. Birds chattered in the bushes and trees nearby; otherwise, it was as quiet as outdoors ever gets. I always loved to stop at the spring, and I always hated to leave it.

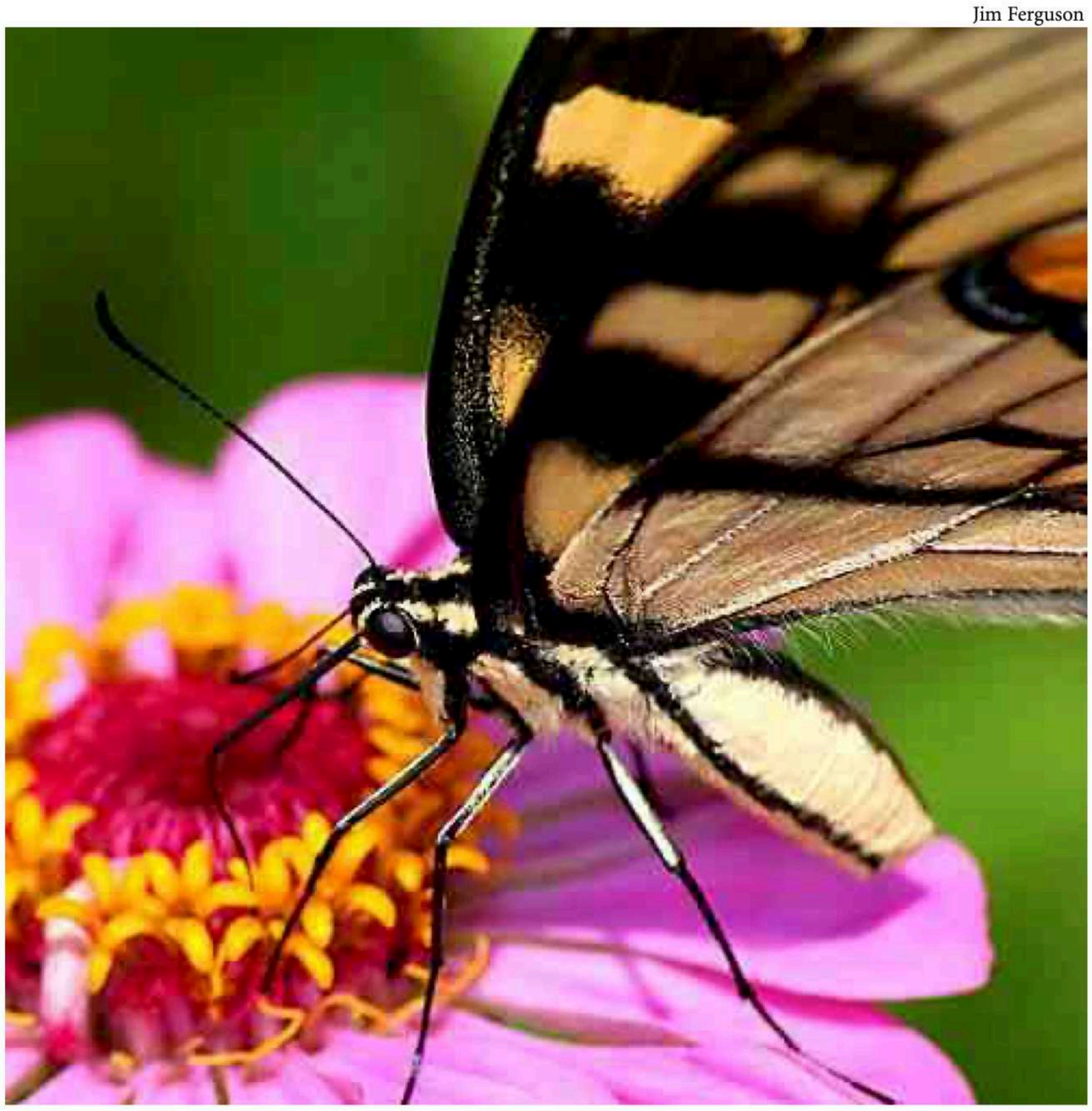
But Cy was ready to leave, and centrifugal insertion and more fishing remained. We filled the canteen after one more drink and got back into the boat.

Moving on to Quieter Waters

Although Cy had lots of patience, his need to catch fish to take home drove him from place to place on the river, especially as late afternoon approached. Sometime about the middle of the afternoon, he would announce that we were going to head upstream farther to some other fishing holes he had in his repertory. This was always good news to me.

Sometimes when we reeled in our lines before moving on, I noticed that the

Jim Ferguson



A swallowtail butterfly.

D. W. McGary

Wondering on a ledge.

hooks were bare, even though there had been no bites. Cy's explanation was that dragging the bait up through the current had probably dislodged the crabs or minnows. But I wondered whether centrifugal insertion had loosened things up too much and that we might have been sitting for a half hour or more waiting for fish to bite on empty hooks.

For the trip upstream, I sat facing ahead to watch for obstructions, a task Cy gave me, I believe, to make me feel useful. From his vantage point (standing up on the backseat) and with his knowledge of the river, I doubt that there was much chance of hitting anything unexpectedly.

The upstream fishing spots Cy went to were not out in a channel far off the shoreline. Instead, they were in fairly deep pockets of quiet water among the ledges. Other than maneuvering through occasional breaks in the ledges, poling was easy, as though moving along the surface of a pond. From the vantage point of the years since those trips, I estimate that we traveled upstream as much as a half mile, to about where the Turnpike Bridge is today.

Cy took us out from shore upstream above one of the ledges, turned the boat broadside to the current, and let it drift down against an exposed section of the ledge, where we then put out an anchor on the ledge and snugged up the rope. The combination of the slight current and the anchor held the boat securely against the ledge, allowing us to step out onto the rock and fish from it.

When we fished off a ledge, Cy would let me go off on my own to do what I wanted. That meant I could fish with my worms on a corked line or I could explore the ledge. I usually did some of each while he tried spot after spot along the length of the ledge.

The quiet water between ledges, especially upstream close to the rocks, was a haven for sunfish and rock bass, and I could usually catch one after another as long as I wanted to, even in the middle of the afternoon. But I probably spent as much time walking along the exposed ledges just investigating things.

Bird life was plentiful among the ledges. Herons and egrets hunted in the shallow water and stained the ledges white with their droppings. Ducks paddled around in flotillas made up of fuzzy young and protective adults. Sandpipers dipped and flitted. An occasional gull floated by. And there were all kinds of other things to find and wonder about: crayfish shells left from a bird's meal, bones and pieces of fur from something eaten, ribs and pieces of skin from a fish, huge black horseflies buzzing in the air, dragonflies and damselflies flitting from place to place, whirligig beetles in the water, water striders walking on the surface, minnows and other small fish swimming among the crevices, a turtle head sticking up in the water, a piece of snakeskin hanging from a tree branch stuck on the ledge, a dead catfish floating belly up, plants with pink blossoms waving in the slight current. In its own sunlit way, a ledge was as magical as the butterfly spring. On the ledges, I fished little, wandered more, wondered most.

We moved frequently from one ledge to another as the afternoon wore on, probably because Cy was feeling pressure to catch something to take home. Up to this point, our fish bag had only a couple of sunfish in it. Cy's sense of desperation during these moves was missing in me. I simply loved making the moves from ledge to ledge—because of *how* we made them.

To move to a different ledge, Cy would pole us along the ledge we were on until he came to a break in it. There he would turn the boat into the current floating through the break and let us drift downstream to reach another ledge.

As we drifted quietly, I would lie on my stomach across the front seat with my head over the edge of the boat, sometimes with my hands in the water, feeling the coolness and just sensing the pull of the water against my fingers. While Cy was intent on locating the next stopping point, I was watching the passing scenery in the water: the long waving strands of *Anacharis*, the tiny bass fingerlings with black lines on their tails, bright little sunfish, shiners, mussel shells on the bottom, a sudden violent sweep of a big carp, insect larvae, crabs, a small water snake—all against a changing colored background of rocks, all slowly silently passing away from me upstream. With every move we made among the ledges, I watched a whole vibrant world of life glide by below me.

Starting for Home

The short drifts among the ledges meant that the end of the fishing trip was at hand. By the time we had reached the point from which we had poled upstream after the break at the spring, it was probably six o'clock or later, and we still had to cross the river, beach the boat, walk back across White House Lane, leave the oars, pole, and other things at Grandma Bess's house, and then catch the bus to get back to Steelton.

I had no regrets about starting for home. We had been out on the river under the summer sun for as long as eight or more hours, with only one stop at the spring and the short periods on the ledges as breaks from sitting on the wooden boat seats. Besides, by that time I was getting hungry. So, when Cy pulled in lines for the last time, took off the hooks and sinkers and reeled in, I followed suit and perched on the front seat ready for the crossing.

Looking back on the trips I made with Cy, I remember them as generally unproductive in terms of catches. I don't re-

member taking home anything much longer than a foot. Other than an occasional eel or yellow catfish, the catches consisted of smallmouth bass, rock bass, and sunfish. But anything that fit the legal limit was kept, and that included a lot of small sunfish and rock bass, which my mother and grandmother ended up having to clean when we got back home.

Our overall way of fishing probably had a lot to do with our low productivity. We always visited the same fishing spots, which meant that the fish we took out on one trip, few as they were, were not there the next time. Then too, although live bait remains even today the recognized best bass bait for the river, how we fished it may have been a factor—but the time of day we fished probably mattered the most. We were on the water during the hottest, brightest time of day, conditions that drive fish into hiding and make them lethargic. But we had little choice because of our dependence on buses for transportation and the time it took just to get to the water and then back home.

On some days, about midafternoon, I regretted having agreed to go along with Cy, especially on those days when the boat was sitting up on the tar bed, or when we got caught out on the water before we could get ashore to escape a sudden storm, or when even the sunfish and rock bass would not take worms. But things never got so bad that I wasn't ready to go along the next time he came calling at our house looking for someone interested in going fishing.

The author with an above-average catch. From the collection of D. W. McGary.

Landing and Disembarkation

Cy poled us at a slight upstream angle across the river, through the eastern wasteland toward the shoreline some distance above White House Lane. At that point he had me sit in the middle seat to keep the bow up out of the water as much as possible. Then he let the current take us downstream toward our ring stone.

If the water was not too low when we came in from fishing, Cy would give one final strong push at just the right time, and the bow would wind up sitting on gravel, and I would get out and secure it there. Then it was just a matter of getting all the stuff out of the boat, chaining the boat and anchors to the ring stone, and pushing the boat off the shore so that it was floating. If the water was low, there was a different procedure. And on this trip, the water was low.

As we drifted toward our ring stone, we found that the plank and rocks we had used in the morning to launch were gone, no doubt used by someone else during the day.

Cy let the boat drift farther downstream, below our ring stone, until he spotted two large rocks and a section of plank near the tar, where he then maneuvered the boat toward the rocks and gave enough of a push to put the bow against them. With the bow line in hand, I got out onto the rocks, stepped onto the plank, and got to the gravel on shore. I kept tension on the bow line to keep the boat against the rocks and enable Cy to get out with the pole. Once he was on shore, he pushed the boat away from the rocks into the current, then walked up the shore on the gravel, holding the boat by the bow line. By carefully pulling at just the right times, he gradually moved the boat along the shore to where the ring stone was. There he pulled hard enough to bring the light empty boat far enough over the tar to get the front end to the gravel.

Once we had everything out of the boat, Cy fastened the long chain to it, moved the ring stone several feet farther out toward the water, locked the chain and anchors to the ring stone, and gave the boat a shove hard enough to dislodge it from the tar and get it into the water. Difficult as this procedure was, it was the only way to avoid one or both of us having to walk across White House Lane for a quarter mile with feet and legs coated with tar.

Once the boat had been chained, we gathered up all of our things—the pole, oars, rods, tackle box, creel, nets, live-bait bucket, fish bag, and canteen—and trekked across White House Lane to Grandma Bess's house to catch the bus back up to Steelton.

Orange Drink and the Bus Home

At Grandma Bess's house, we deposited the things that were kept there and then looked for a bus coming up from Middletown. Bess was seldom home when we finished our fishing trips; she worked a night shift at a defense plant somewhere in Harrisburg. She was not at home this time.

It was fine if a bus was in sight, because a half hour would have us home. But if a bus was not in sight or expected soon, it was not a disaster—because of what was next door to Grandma Bess's house.

On the property next to the house, one of Bess's sisters and her family lived and operated what today is called a convenience store. By today's standards, the 1943 store was minimal, providing some drinks, a few fishing supplies, a small selection of foods, and miscellaneous household supplies. But nothing they had there mattered to me except their drink cooler, and nothing in the cooler mattered except the bottles of orange drink sitting in the ice water.

Not much in life has come close to the experience I had of uncapping one of those bottles of orange drink and chugging it down after dehydrating on the Susquehanna for a day. It was why I really

didn't care all that much if we had to wait for a bus. I often thought about it while we were out on the river and especially when we were on the way home across the river. I could have cleaned out all the orange drink they had, but the limit was two.

Someone would keep a lookout for the bus while we were in the store. Schedules were available, but buses seemed more to follow their own inclinations than to bend to what was on paper. A difference of a half hour or more between scheduled arrivals and actual arrivals was common.

When the bus came into sight a quarter mile down the road, we gathered up everything and walked to the corner to be picked up. A half hour later we were carrying rods, creel, the tackle box, and a modestly filled fish bag up Walnut Street the three blocks to home.

Perspective

Compared with the boy and the man I had watched launch their boat and roar off down the Susquehanna toward where we had fished in 1943, Cy and I were deprived in a lot of ways. We couldn't get out on the river and fish during the evening hours when it was cooler and the fish were more active. We had to ride buses and carry our equipment a quarter mile or more just to get to our boat. We had to use centrifugal insertion most of the time, just to get bait to the fish. Sometimes we had to launch or land on a layer of noxious tar. And we had to use a lot of time just to pole the boat across the river to get from place to place to fish. But we were no different from others in 1943. Only in terms of the boy and man of today were we deprived in 1943. In 1943 we were not deprived: opportunities and technologies in boats, motors, and fishing equipment were not there for anyone, not just us. Deprivation is relative.

What people today view as benefits of technology and opportunity can be, at the same time, impediments to special experiences that have capacity to enrich life far into the future. Skimming along the Susquehanna from place to place during the best time of the day to fish, sitting up high on padded pedestal seats, casting lures unknown in 1943 from rods, reels, and lines unknown in 1943, then getting back to shore and home in a period of a few hours all stand in the way of subtle, sublimely enriching experiences with a river and the creatures that live in and around it. Such experiences may be close to impossible today. They depend too much on opportunities that today's man and boy can't have because of how they live and because of what they have. The experiences that count most out on a river may very well depend on being in a flat-bottomed wooden boat poled around by someone like Cy in the middle of a summer day.

I don't regret at all having grown up without the conveniences and opportunities that today's man and boy have. I am sure that they find pleasures on the river and will have memories to look back on over the years, as I have. But I question whether their pleasures and memories will fill up their senses over the years in as lasting a way as my memories of Cy and the Susquehanna do for me. For them, what will be equal to the magic of the butterfly spring, or the creatures wriggling in a crab net, or all that lay along a rock ledge, or the gentle quiet passing of life between ledges?

Rather than feel deprived or regretful, I feel that I was blessed to have been twelve years old in 1943 with a grandfather named Cy who could pole a wooden boat and who knew where the fish were and where the butterfly spring was and who probably understood what was happening to me out walking along a ledge or lying across the front seat of a boat watching a whole world of life glide by a foot away.

D. W. McGary

Later generations on the ledges.