

"Fly-Fishing—Landing the Bass"



## Early Florida Fly Fishing

by Paul Schullery



*It was Hilaire Belloc who once said, "the ideal thing is for the historian to write his history, and then to have a gang of trained slaves who can go through the proofs from various aspects." Considering the quality and the sheer volume of his writing, one would think Paul Schullery possessed his own "trained slaves." But no, though ubiquitous, Paul is simply a fine historian and, like any workmanlike scholar, he is primarily a seeker of truth. Indeed, as his *American Fly Fishing: A History* (Nick Lyons Books, New York, 1987), will attest, this historian is singularly adept at parting those thick concealing mists of time and setting the record straight. In "Early Florida Fly Fishing," Paul offers us another very tantalizing early account of fly fishing in North America, in this instance, as practiced in the Old South during the early to mid-19th century.*

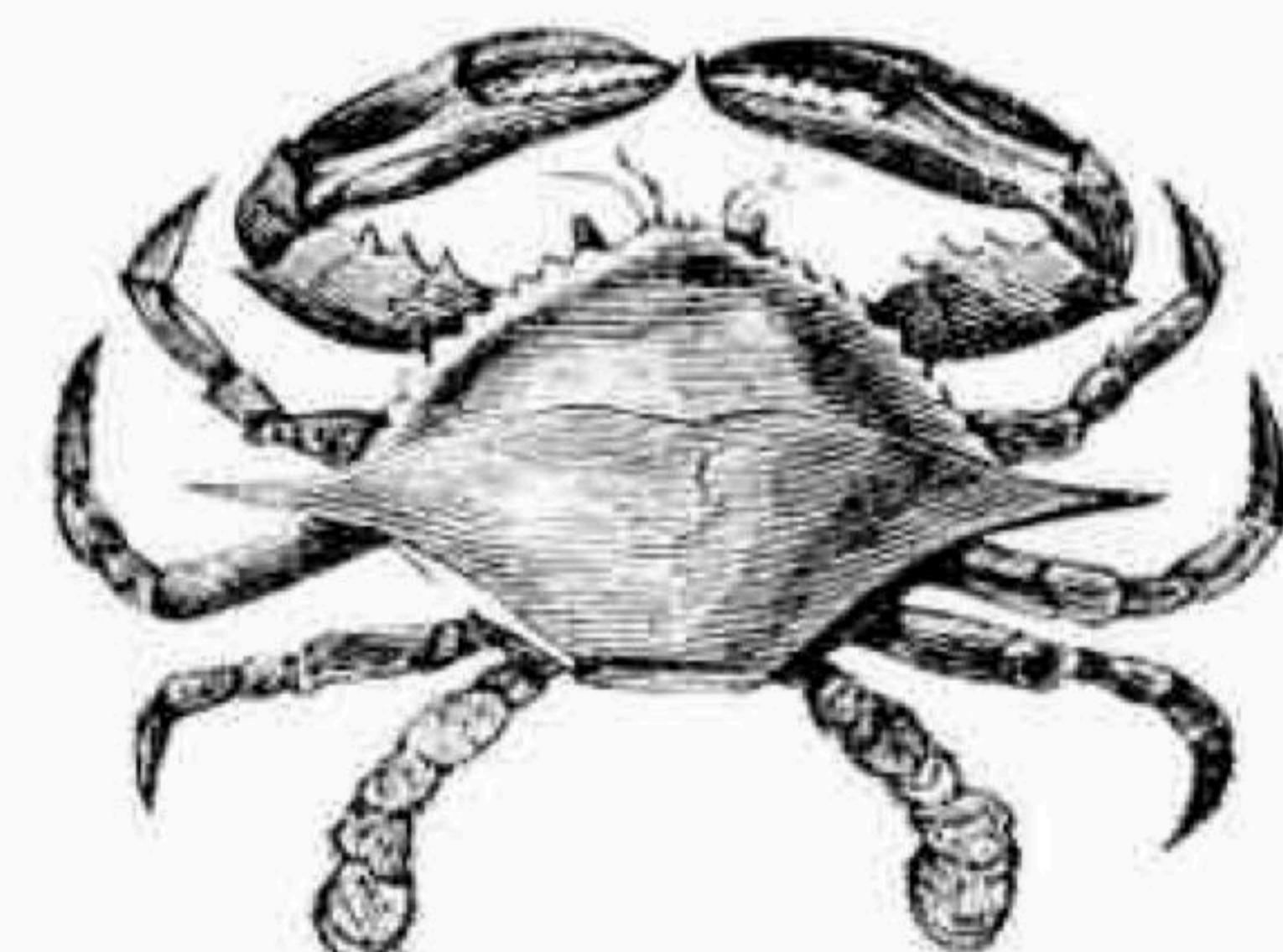
D.S.J.

IN MY BOOK *American Fly Fishing: A History*, I suggest that fly fishing was probably common in the New World much earlier than widely supposed. As *The American Fly Fisher*'s former editor, David Ledlie, recently discovered, it was practiced in Canada as early as the 1760s. I see no reason why some adventurous sportsman might not have cast a fly in North American waters even in the 1600s; fly tackle is not that hard to make, and many well-to-do colonists could easily have brought tackle with them from England or some other country. I consider these early years the most challenging, and in many ways the most interesting, subject for the historian of American sport.

There are regions of North America that we haven't really thought about, much less studied, in fishing history.



"The Large Mouthed Black Bass"

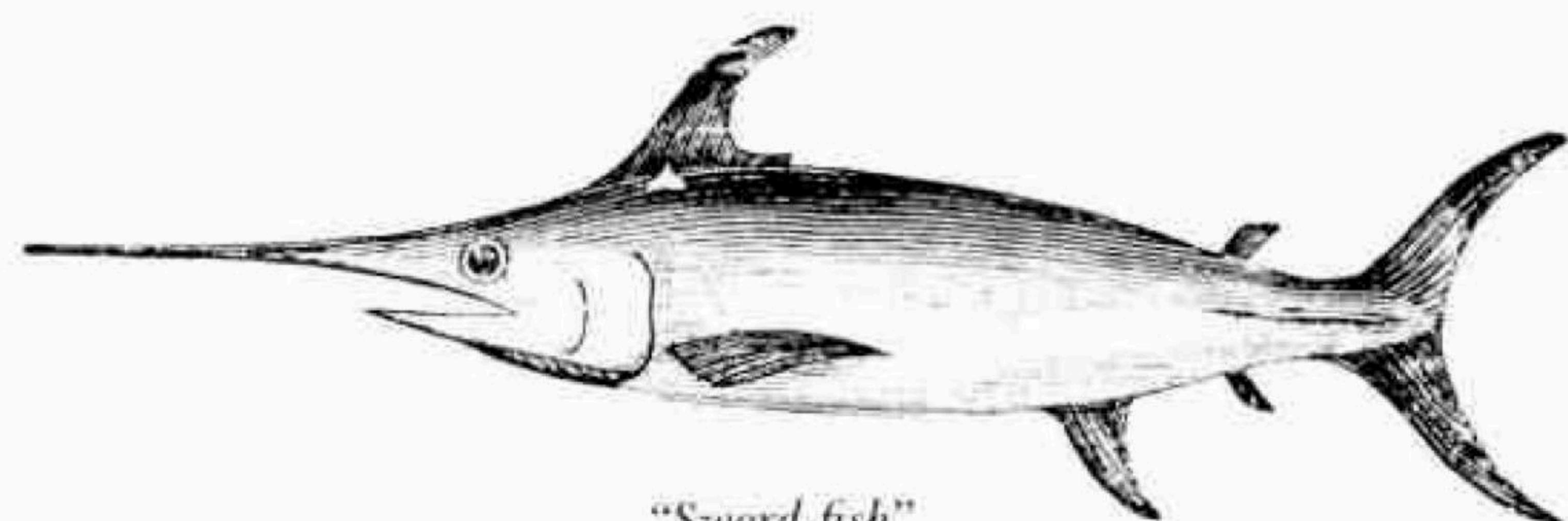


"Edible Crab"

Mexico and Spanish California surely deserve a little attention; we know now that the Spanish fly fishing tradition is more or less as old as the British.

Another is the Old South. In my recent book *The Bear Hunter's Century*, I take considerable pains to point out that before the Civil War the South was widely regarded as the leading region for sportsmen. There, Americans came close to creating if not a royal at least a noble class, though we now consider their way of doing it anything but noble. Rich planters, supported by slave labor, lived a pace of life that gave ample time for sport on a grand scale. Some bought huge tracts of land just for hunting, and followed sporting codes and practices as aristocratic as those of their British forebears.

But we don't have all that many rec-



"Sword-fish"



"Saw-fish"

ords of fly fishing in the Old South. It could be argued that this is because fly fishing, back then, was perhaps more closely associated with trout, but that is a flawed argument. The southern Appalachians did, in fact, support healthy trout populations. And fly fishing for other species was not unheard of even in the Old World in 1800.

I suppose there were many reasons that little record survives of southern fly fishing before 1860. For one thing, there were other sports of greater interest, including horse racing and hunting. For another, most of these sportsmen, like most today, did not write much down

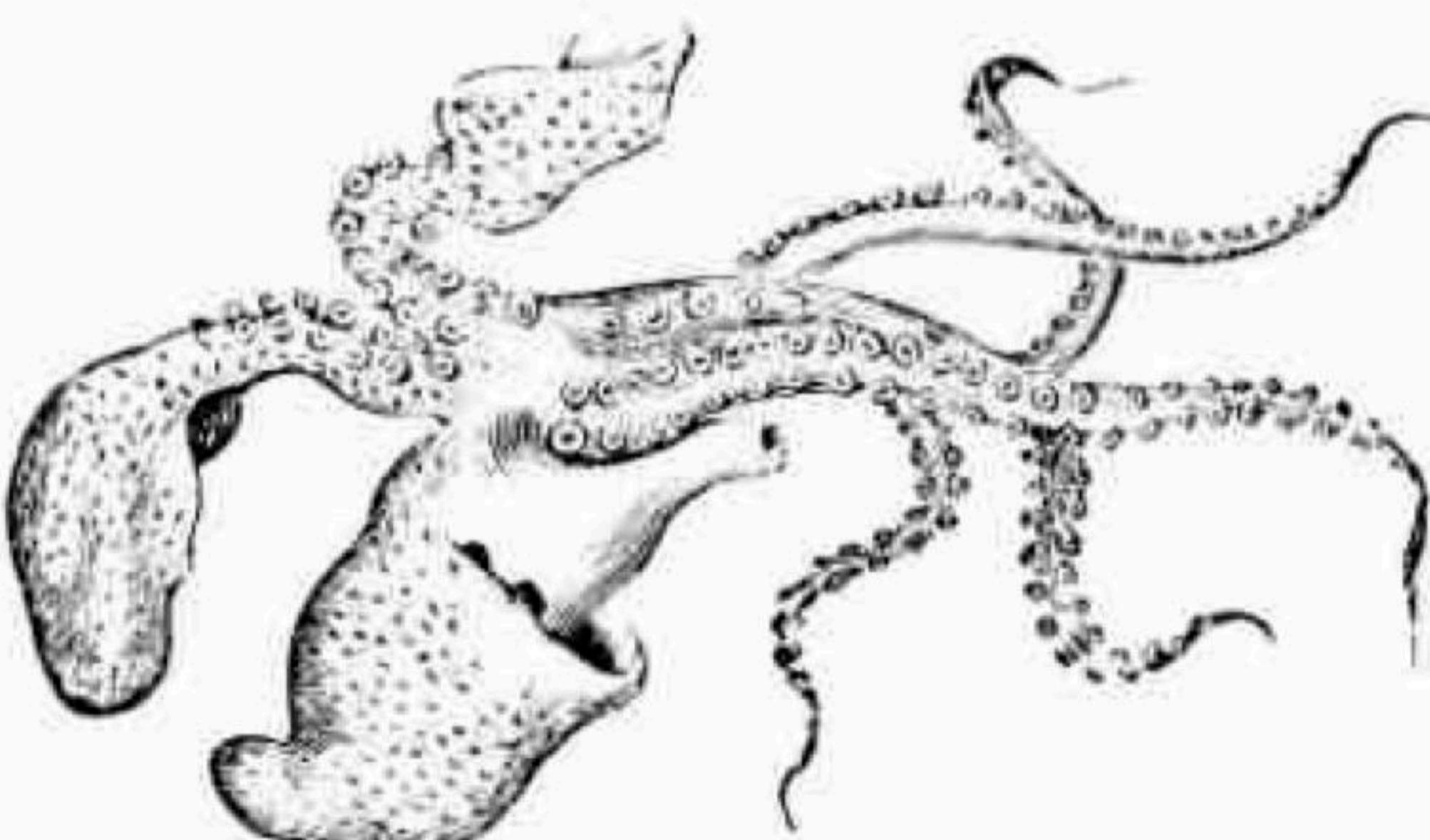
All of this is a roundabout way of introducing an intriguing piece of historical evidence, an early account of fly fishing for bass in Florida.

It is difficult to know exactly when this episode occurred. The account was published in *The Spirit of the Times*, May 16, 1857, on page 165, and credited to the *London Field*. But I suspect that it may have described an event that occurred at least a few years earlier, perhaps many. The final sentence in the paragraph I quote seems to indicate that it had been a while since the unidentified writer visited Florida.

The article was entitled "Sporting in America," and was clearly the work of a widely-traveled person. He (it seems safe to assume the writer was male) also talked about salmon fishing in Canada, bird-shooting in New England, and harpooning giant rays in the Gulf of Mexico. He was quite a traveler, and apparently saw some remarkable things.

But on to his tale of fly fishing. Here is the appropriate paragraph:

The fishing in Florida is good; but there is, owing to the absence of salmon and trout, no great variety. The inhabitants will insist upon it that the black bass is a trout. I was, perhaps, the first man who saw a bass taken in the St. John with a fly, and a noble fish it was. Though I eat a portion of it and can testify to its goodness, I did not see it



"Argonaut without the shell"

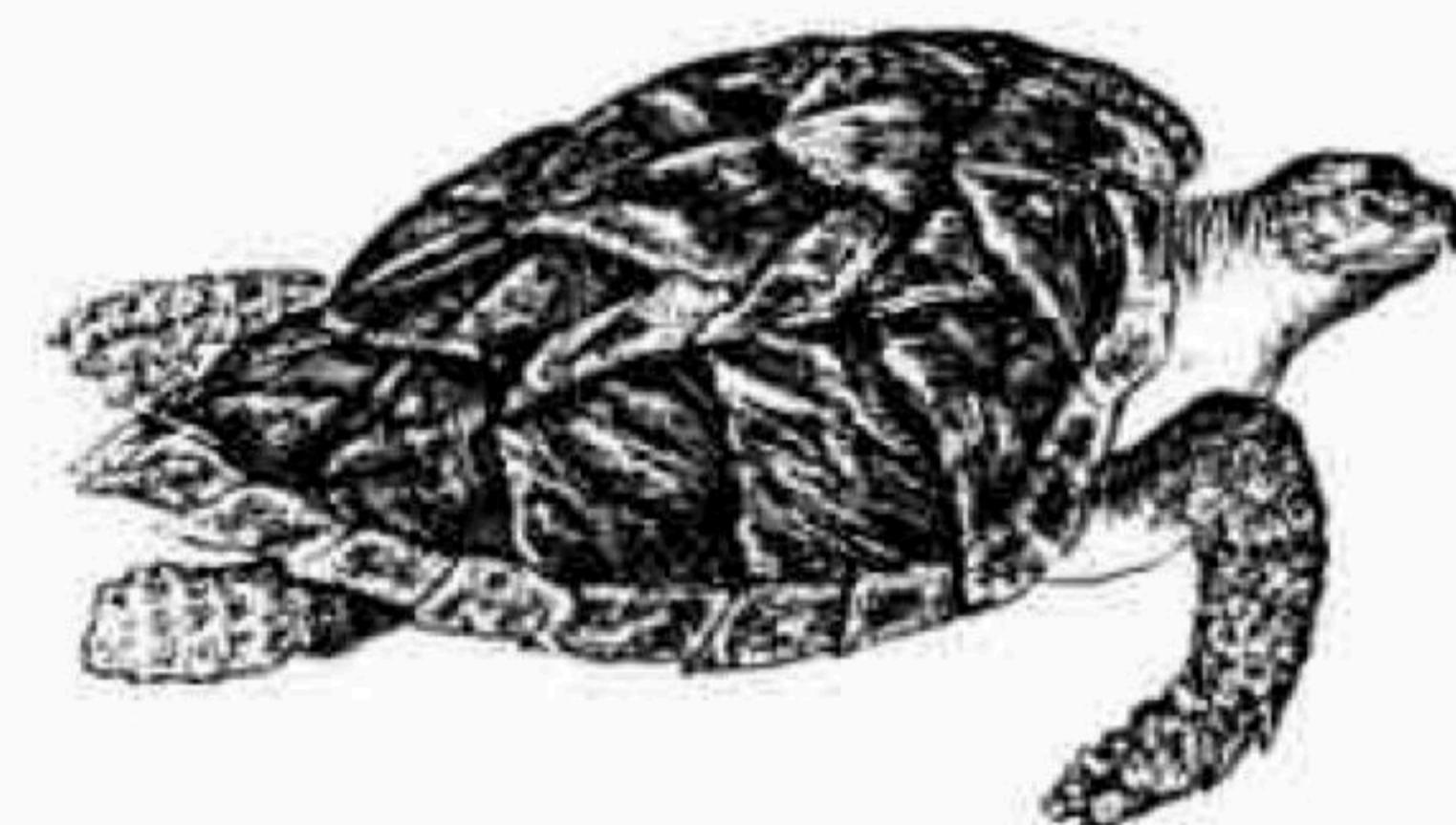
about their sport. We rely on incidental records, and the further back we go, the weaker those records become.

But I like to imagine that here and there, flies were being cast wherever water conditions might allow. I even can imagine an occasional adventurer casting in the salt water along the coast, or farther south, in the Caribbean. Imagine the brief thrill provided the first fisherman to discover that barracuda would take a fly, and his shock when that first powerful run and leap shattered his rod or dismantled his reel.

weighed; but was informed that, when ready dressed for cooking, it was upwards of 13 lb.—and this, I found, was not by any means an unusual weight. The gentleman to whom I suggested that the bass would take a fly was Antonio Murette, Esq., of St. Augustine; and, if he be now alive, he has, I doubt not, taken tons of bass with a fly.

It appears that these gentlemen had not thought of trying saltwater fish; indeed, the author does not seem to consider them at all, judging from his remark about the lack of variety of fish in a state known for its exceptional diversity of fish species.

So, there we have another isolated early account that alone proves nothing much, but that suggests worlds about what kind of fishing might have been going on in the region, and about how much fun it had to be. Some day I hope we learn more. §



"Hawksbill or Shell Turtle"

PAUL SCHULLERY, a Research Technical Writer in Yellowstone National Park, was Director of The American Museum of Fly Fishing from 1977 to 1983. His sixteen books include *American Fly Fishing: A History* (1987), and *Freshwater Wilderness: Yellowstone Fishes and Their World* (1983, co-author John Varley). An active conservationist and widely published nature writer, Paul is also on the Council of Advisors of the National Parks and Conservation Association.

Illustrations: "Fly-Fishing—Landing the Bass" and "The Large Mouthed Black Bass," (p. 14) originally appeared in James A. Henshall's *Book of Black Bass* (Robert Clarke & Co., Cincinnati, 1881). The remaining illustrations on p. 14-15 are taken from Charles F. Holder's *Along The Florida Reef* (D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1892).



"The Bill or Gar-fish"