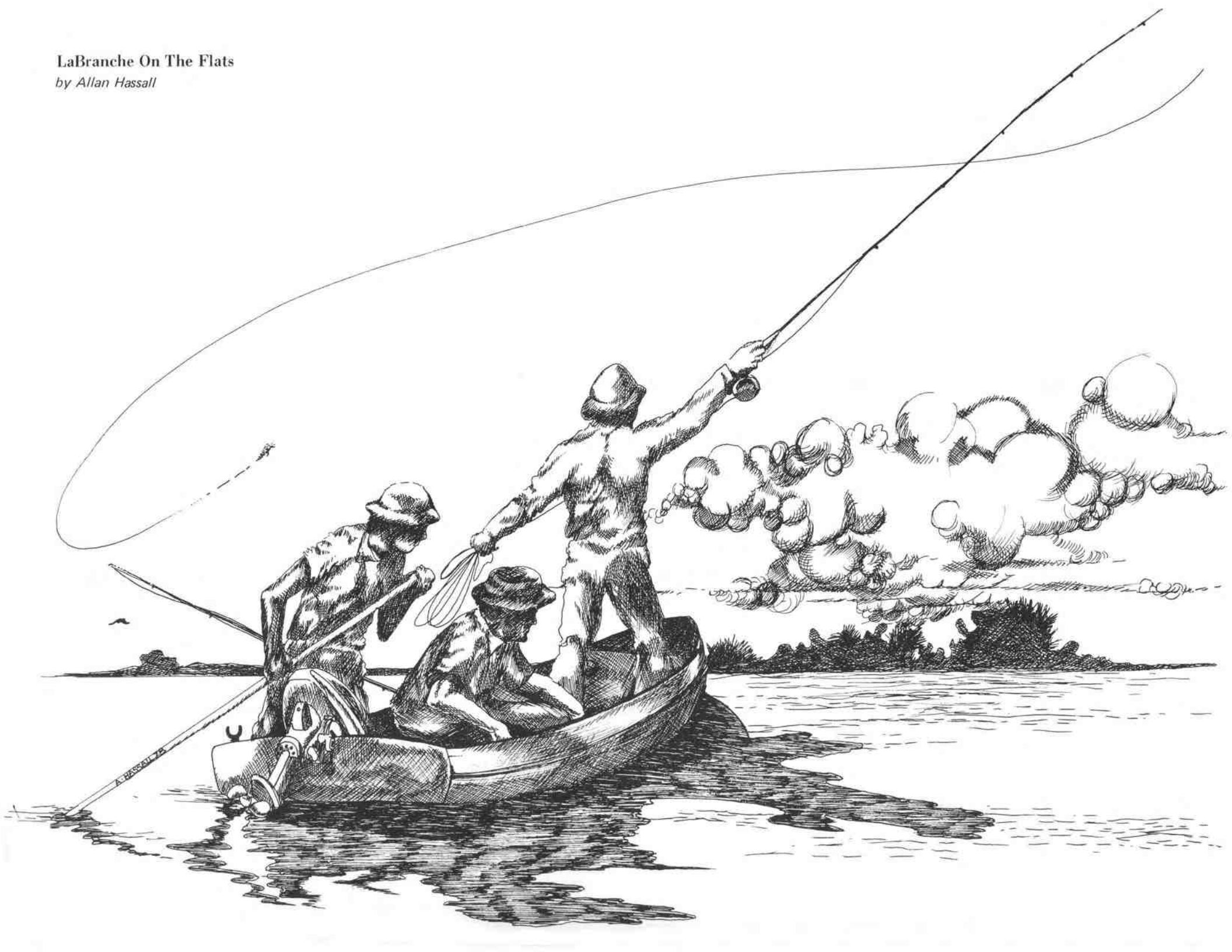
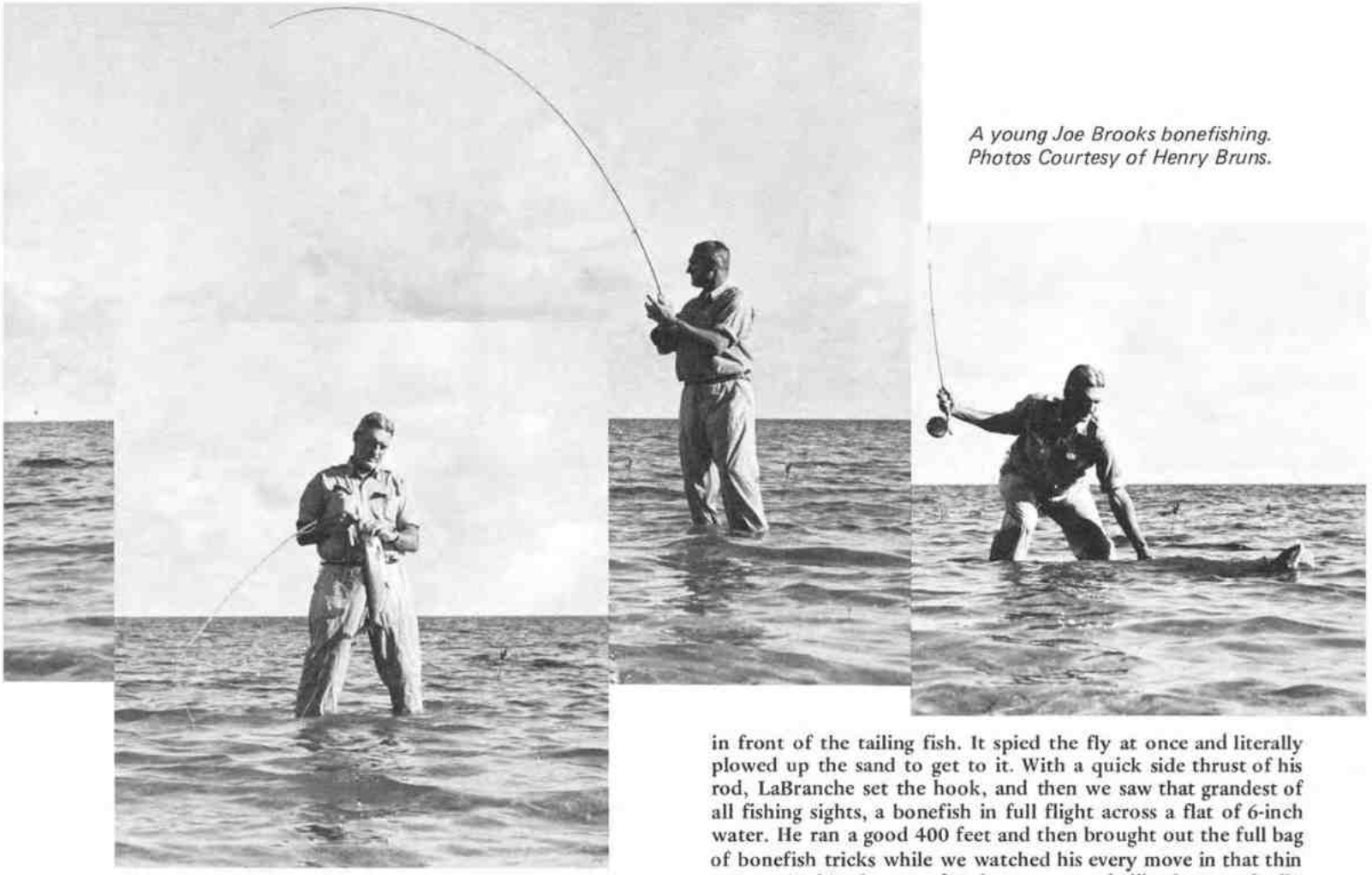
LaBranche On The Flats

by Allan Hassall



Historic Moments in Saltwater Fly Fishing
from the Writings of Joe Brooks



A young Joe Brooks bonefishing. Photos Courtesy of Henry Bruns.

George LaBranche's First Fly-Caught Bonefish

I was lucky enough to sit in on George M. L. LaBranche's first encounter with a bonefish via the fly-casting method, in just such thin water. LaBranche, internationally known angler and authority on trout and Atlantic salmon, had taken many bonefish on bait, but up to this time had not presented a fly to them. We went out, with Frankee Albright guiding, to fish the banks on the Gulf side of Islamorada. The water was glassy and when Frankee poled us out on the flat, the tide was so low that there was only 6 inches of water. I knew it was going to be a very tough job to even get close to a bonefish, much less hook one.

As Frankee poled us along, I watched LaBranche tie a white bucktail onto his 6-pound test leader. Then the canny angling veteran took up his line dressing and applied a liberal touch of it to the underside of the bucktail. He was taking no chances of that fly catching on the bottom in that shallow water.

Frankee spotted a bonefish tailing about a hundred feet away and poled cautiously toward it. Its caudal fin flashed in the sunlight and once we saw the whole back as it slid over a thick growth of grass. At 60 feet LaBranche got ready to cast. At 50 he made a couple of false casts, then shot the fly out like a bullet and stopped his rod, dropping the fly lightly 2 feet in front of the tailing fish. It spied the fly at once and literally plowed up the sand to get to it. With a quick side thrust of his rod, LaBranche set the hook, and then we saw that grandest of all fishing sights, a bonefish in full flight across a flat of 6-inch water. He ran a good 400 feet and then brought out the full bag of bonefish tricks while we watched his every move in that thin water. At last he was fought to a standstill, then gradually brought to boat. I heard Frankee say, as she slipped the net under him, "Congratulations, Mr. LaBranche. He'll go about 9 pounds." A 9-pound fish in 6 inches of water!

Fly Fishing for Bonefish

No one seems to have heard of any bonefish being caught on flies before 1926, when the famous wing shot, Colonel L. S. Thompson of Red Bank, New Jersey, was fishing Long Key with the veteran bonefish guide, J. T. Harrod. They fished bait in the orthodox manner but at high tide, when the bonefishing fell off, Colonel Thompson would get out his fly rod, put on a royal coachman wet fly, size 6, and cast for baby tarpon. He caught some bonefish while trying for the tarpon but considered it just an accident when the bonefish hit. When the tide went out and the bonefish appeared on the banks they went back to bait fishing for them, rather than trying the fly.

The first two tailing fish to be deliberately fished for with flies and caught, were taken by the writer, while guided by Captain Jimmie Albright, at Islamorada. It was June, 1947, and my old friend Allen Corson, then Outdoor Editor of the Miami *Herald,* had set up a fishing trip to the Keys for me. The previous night we had talked of the possibility of taking bonefish on flies and, as far as Jimmie and others sitting in on the conversation could say, only four men besides Colonel Thompson had

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caught bonefish in this way. They, also had been fishing for baby tarpon and regarded their catch as accidental. Captain Bill Smith, another famous Keys guide, mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, had been one of these four, and as one of the earliest fly tiers on the Keys he was anxious to see the experiment made.

We left Jimmie's dock at 8 o'clock in the morning and ran back on the Gulf side of the Keys. Jimmie's boat, the *Rebel*, was towing the skiff from which we would fish, Jimmie to do the poling. A half mile from Peterson Key, Jimmie anchored the *Rebel* and we climbed into the skiff. Jimmie picked up the poling pole and started to push toward the flat.

"I don't want to run the motor too close to the flat," he said. "It would scare the fish."

He headed for the first school of bonefish we saw tailing on the flat, their tails flickering and waving in the sun. He stopped the skiff when we were about 70 feet away. The water was only 8 inches deep.

"Move a bit closer," I whispered.

At 60 feet I started false casting, then shot the fly out. It dropped a foot in front of the feeding school and two of them saw it and raced for it. They put up bow waves as they zeroed in. One took, turned, and when I struck he raced away.

I had caught Atlantic salmon and I know how fast a fish can get into your backing but what happened then was unbelievable. That baby shot across the flat as though out of a cannon, tossing sand and water in back of him, hit a 50-foot channel, zoomed through that and mounted the flat beyond. He was going faster than sound. All I could do was hold the rod high and hang on. He ran 600 feet, then slowed down and I turned him and got him coming and reeled fast until he was only 100 yards again. He tired and I got him back to 30 feet, where he started circling the boat, fighting with his body always slanted away, hard to turn. I finally got his head up and skidded him over the net Jimmie was holding. Jimmie scooped and we had him, 8 pounds, a wonderful fish that made a bonefish fan of me right there and then. A half hour later we had another, this an 8½-pounder.

Those first two fish hit a streamer designed by the late Red Greb of Miami, a barred rock wing affair with white chenille body, tied on a 1/0 hook. The story of their sensational runs and of the excitement of stalking bonefish across a shallow flat and dropping a fly in front of them, sparked a stampede of fly fishermen to the Keys, all intent on getting in on this new game.

I returned to the Keys that autumn and Allen and I started a bonefish search that covered something like 2500 miles along the length of the Keys and up and down their byways. We drove through veritable jungles on Upper Key Largo as we followed old roads into the beach - old roads so thickly overgrown that it was like going through a tunnel. The roadbeds were rough coral rock and the branches of the trees scraped the paint from both sides of the car. It often took some fancy maneuvering to get out again, and once out of the car we had to case the ground very carefully because this was rattlesnake country. But one way or another we made it to the flats that stretched along the shore. We had the flats to ourselves. The fish were just as scary then as they are now at low tide, when they were wallowing along in only 5 or 6 inches of water.

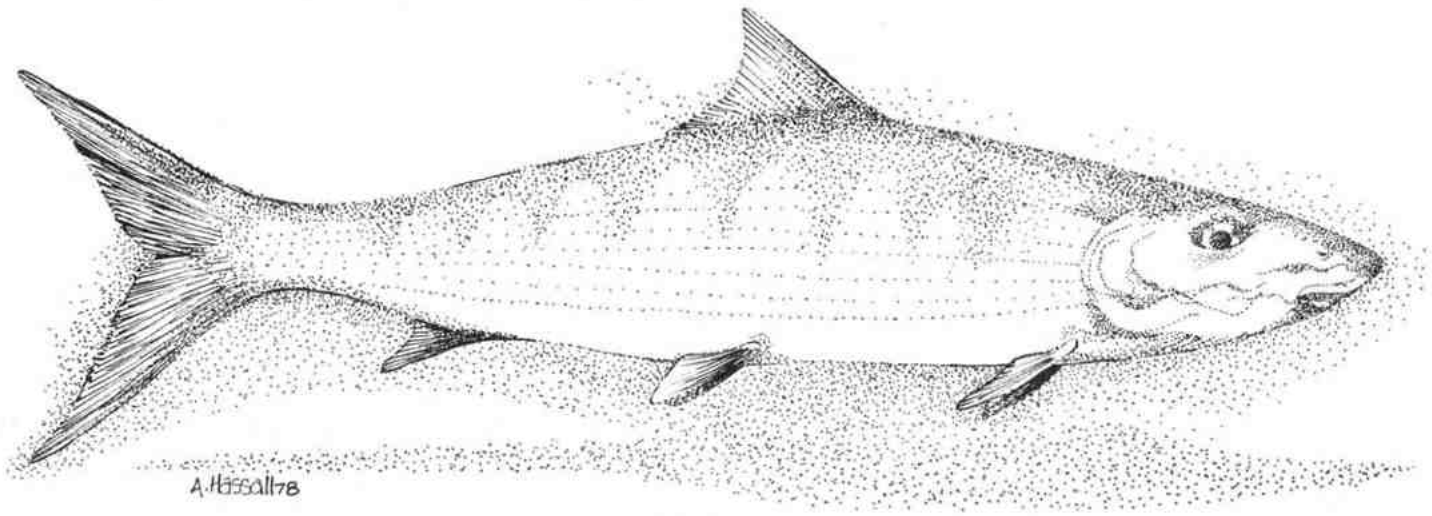
When we found them in deeper water, from 1 foot to 2½ feet, they didn't show so much alarm. But if we dropped the line over them, or cast too far so the line went over them in the air, they would bolt for the blue. But it was better than wonderful and we had a fall and winter I'll never forget.

The first flies tied expressly for bonefish were streamers about 2 inches long; but early fly casters soon learned to carry flies in three sizes: a 1½-inch bucktail or streamer tied on a No. 4 hook for extremely shallow water and for late spring and early summer use; a 2 or 2½-inch fly on a No. 2 hook for medium depth water, from 1 to 2½ feet deep; and a 3-inch streamer or bucktail tied on a 1/0 hook for bonefish in water as deep as 4 feet. The flies were all-white, all-yellow, brown-and-white wings, red hackle with yellow wings, or gray hackle with brown chenille body and white wings. One of the best bonefish flies I've ever used is the Phillips pink shrimp. As with the other bonefish flies, you should choose its size to match the depth of the water. In very shallow water a heavy hook will sink and catch on the bottom.

Permit on the Fly

When I first heard about permit, everyone I talked to said they would not take a fly. But a group of us who were confirmed fly fishermen thought we'd give it a try. We decided to make an exploratory trip for permit, using flies only. It was May, 1950, as we climbed aboard Captain Leo Johnson's houseboat, the *Islamorada*, and towing three skiffs to fish from, headed 20 miles into the Gulf from Marathon on the Florida Keys. We were headed for the Content Keys, well known to be the headquarters of a lot of permit. With me were Captain Bill Smith and his wife, Bonnie; my wife, Mary; and Ralph Miller, designer and manufacturer of the famous Leaping Lena plug.

I fished with Leo Johnson the first morning. Leo stopped the motor well out, then poled in to the flats, in order not to scare any nearby fish. There was no wind and a good 1½ feet of water covered the flat. We saw three schools of tailing permit right away, their black-looking, sickle-shaped tails sticking out of the water as they fed. I was using my favorite saltwater fly fishing



Bonefish

outfit, a 9½-foot Orvis fly rod, slow action, a GAF fly line, and my leader was tapered down to a 10-pound test tippet. In an experimental mood, I had tied onto my tippet a 2/0 Johnson Golden Minnow fly rod spoon.

Leo poled me quietly into range, held the boat there 60 feet from the fish. I got the line in the air, made a cast, and dropped the small spoon a foot in front of the tailers. I let it sink a bit, then started it slowly back.

Several tails disappeared and I knew those fish were charging my lure. There was a hard hit and I struck. The fish darted away, rushing through the water as fast as a bonefish. After a run of about 150 feet he slowed and stopped to go broadside to the skiff. I pulled on the rod to test his weight. He didn't feel heavy. I put pressure on and began pulling him back with the rod, reeling fast as I dropped the tip, then pumping again. I knew by now he was not a big fish so I gave him the works, and in 10 minutes had him over the landing net Leo was holding in the water. He made a dip and came up with the fish. He was a 5-pound 10-ounce permit, the first, as far as we could find out, ever caught on a fly rod outfit with an artificial lure, cast and retrieved in an orthodox manner.

On the second day Bill Smith and I were partners. We waded along in the water less than knee deep, about 60 feet apart. We hadn't gone 30 feet before Bill saw one and cast. There was a big swirl, the rod tip went down and then Bill was holding it high as that permit broke all speed records in a straight beeline for the Gulf water, half a mile away.

"He's going to clean me," yelled Bill.

And he did. He ran out all the fly line, all the backing, and popped the tippet.

That morning Leo, Bonnie, and Mary also joined the ranks of those who have hooked permit on a fly, but all lost them.

The last day of our trip Bonnie and I went out and fished from a skiff. I was using an 8-pound test tippet, feeling that I might get more hits with the light tippet than with the 10-pound. We had been out only a few minutes when Bonnie spoke up.

"Get a fly to that school over there," she said.

I looked where she had indicated. There were perhaps 35 permit in that school, the tails erect like the bayonets of a marching army. Bonnie poled toward them. As we moved quietly along I saw two fish turn under the water, their broad sides flashing silver. It was a thrilling sight and I was shaking.

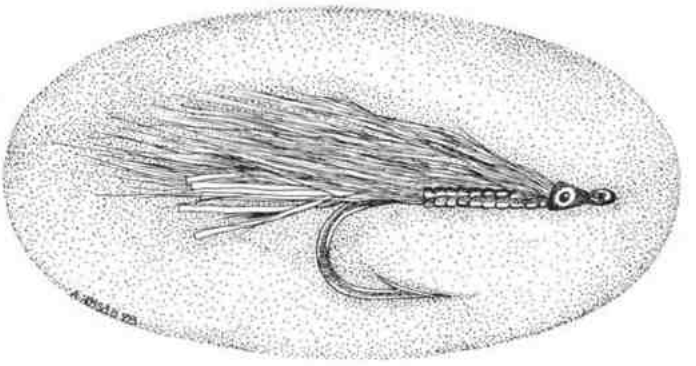
We were close enough.

I got the line in the air and shot out the 1/0 bonefish bucktail I was using that day.

"Take it, take it, take it," I muttered as I started the retrieve.

One of them did take, and I struck, and had him on.

He went off on a long, fast, curving run to the right. Suddenly 600 feet of line was gone. Then, luckily, he stopped. But only long enough to turn toward the skiff and charge back in our direction. I reeled and reeled and I was still behind him. I could see the wave he put up out in the shallows, but I couldn't feel him. I had to get that line tight from the rod tip to the fish, to keep him from getting slack and throwing the hook. My fingers were tired and so was my forearm, but I kept reeling then I could see the line finally come tight. But now he tried a new, soul-shaking trick. He started rubbing his rounded nose into the bottom, giving powerful lunges of his body, making the rod tip shake. I dropped the tip, so he wouldn't have anything to pull against, and survived this brutal tactic. He started to swim again. Now I knew the hook was in solid so I pulled back firmly on the rod and turned that baby over, pulling him my way hard; I knew I had hurt him. Again only 40 feet out he tried to rub the hook out against the bottom and I held on with both hands and pulled him out of that. Once more he darted away, off to the right, reversed and headed the other way, and then I got his head up and turned him and brought him skidding along the top, close to the skiff. Keeping the rod tip high I



pulled him in, but he got his head and circled the skiff three times. Then he had had it.

"Are you ready to net him, Bonnie?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "But I have no landing net."

"I'll tail him," she said calmly. "That tail is just built for a good handhold."

Silently I pulled the fish in close. Bonnie reached out, and as she grabbed for him her body got between my eyes and the fish. There was a splash and I closed my eyes.

"You can open them" she said. "I've got him."

She was holding the shiny permit on the bottom of the skiff. He weighed 11 pounds 8 ounces.

Soon after that Eddie Miller, a fine fly caster from Miami, took a nice 14-pounder on a fly, at Key Largo; and then Bonnie Smith took a 12-pounder while wading the beach at Islamorada.

Some time after that, Hagen Sands, outstanding fly fisherman from Key West tied into four permit, one after the other, with flies, but all of them got away.

"The first one must have gone 50 pounds," says Sands. "He took off for Texas and as far as I know he's still running, and trailing all my fly line and backing behind him."

In 1958 Colonel Geoffrey O'Connell took a permit on a fly as he was wading the flats along Upper Key Largo. This fish, weighing 12 pounds 7 ounces, set a new fly rod record for permit in the Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament, and as of 1967 still stands.

Permit will never be easy to take on a fly, but that will always be the most exciting way to go for them. In all my years of fishing for them I have only taken four: the two already described and two others, one at the Isle of Pines, south of Cuba, and the other in the Bahamas.

The story of George LaBranche's first bonefish on a fly is reprinted from "Salt Water Fly Fishing" (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1950) with the permission of Mrs. Mary Brooks. The stories of Joe Brooks' first bonefish and first permit are reprinted from "Salt Water Game Fishing" (Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., copyright, 1968), and are used with permission of the publisher. Our thanks to these copyright holders for sharing this material.

The artist for this article, Mr. Allan Hassall, is a Canadian member of the Museum. When he first offered to illustrate for us he probably did not suspect that the work would require as much time in reading and research as it would in the actual drawing, but this was the case with the re-creation of the LaBranche bonefishing scene. We appreciate Al's generosity with his talents, and look forward to more of his work.

Our thanks also to Henry P. Bruns (whose article appears on page 8) for his help with photographs, as well as with information about saltwater fly fishing.