

Kentucky Waters

Kentucky's initial settlers were undoubtedly amazed at the many miles of rivers and streams they found there. A study of water transportation corridors commissioned by the Commonwealth of Kentucky Transportation Cabinet in February 2000 noted that Kentucky has 49,100 navigable (canoe-floatable) miles of rivers, streams, and tributaries (25), more than any state except Alaska (26). Additionally, the study identified 40,900 unnavigable miles, for a whopping total of 90,000 linear miles of water (27). Of those, 62,000 miles are fishable streams—a truly staggering figure. In that water are 244 species of native freshwater fish, surpassed only by Tennessee and Alabama (27).

Ninety-five percent of the early Kentucky settlers migrated from the colonies of Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. Almost all were of British stock, and probably more than half originally came from Scotland or the north of England (28). Hailing from these areas of the British Isles, many had no doubt developed prowess in casting the fly for trout and salmon. Their love of fishing was practically inborn. These devoted anglers were familiar with the writings of Walton and others; surely some had retained their tackle or that of their forebears. Many were educated, astute individuals who yearned to indulge their piscatorial hobby. What they soon discovered, however, was that the familiar fish species abundant in their homeland were absent from Kentucky waters. Instead, the magnificent streams and rivers were filled with smallmouth bass, walleye, and muskellunge, presenting different opportunities and challenges for their entertainment.

Abundant among the native fish inhabiting these waters was the black bass—specifically, the smallmouth version of the species, *Micropterus dolomieu*, a fish described by Dr. James Alexander Henshall as “inch for inch and pound for pound, the gamest fish that swims” (29). Henshall, born in Baltimore on February 29, 1836, and known as “The Apostle of the Black Bass” (30), anointed Kentucky as the place where black bass fishing became an art. A physician, prolific angling author, and fish culturist, his most famous literary work—*Book of the Black Bass*, published in 1881—is an all-time classic. In the forty-seven years since 1970, the year the Bass Anglers Sportsman's Society started reproducing Henshall's book, hundreds of thousands of copies have been disseminated across the globe.

Early Kentucky Anglers

During the Civil War, Dr. Henshall served as a physician in Cynthiana, Kentucky. There he became intimately familiar with the area, the resident

Chapter 3

THE KENTUCKY BAITCASTING REEL

Mid-1830s to 1928



J. L. Sage Helps Illuminate the History

James L. (J. L.) Sage, one of the lesser-known Kentucky reel makers and longtime friend of Dr. James Henshall, held a unique position with respect to the other Kentucky artisans making reels. Sage lived around the corner; he was part of the same crowd. He was not a bashful man; Sage spoke his mind. Certain episodes and personal relationships in Sage's life uniquely position him to illuminate events in the story of the baitcasting reel that otherwise would have remained unknown or unappreciated. His intricate knowledge of the Kentucky reel as both a maker and an angler, along with his keen personal observations of those who produced it, provide deep insights into parts of the account that otherwise would have remained thirsty.

The 1850 census of Franklin County, Kentucky, recorded that James L. Sage, age twenty-eight, was born in Hartford, Connecticut. Initially he apprenticed as a gunsmith and maker of fine mathematical instruments, working those trades in Frankfort, Kentucky. According to Henshall, Sage repaired reels in Frankfort as early as 1842, when he was twenty years old. Using the tools with which he made Morse telegraph instruments, Sage constructed his first fishing reel in 1848. Henshall said it was the smallest reel he had ever seen; Sage used it to fly-cast for bass.

In about 1850, Sage obtained a job at Frankfort's gas and water works doing "rough work" such as pipe fitting. In 1853 he relocated to the town of Paris in Bourbon County, Kentucky. There Mr. Jeffery, the individual responsible for constructing the town's public works, employed him through the end of the Civil War. In 1865 Sage returned to Frankfort, where he worked as a United States gauger, testing gas and water operations and regulating flows into pipelines. In 1883 he finally began making fishing reels full-time, patterning them after the type initially produced by Jacob Hardman, a Louisville reel maker (41).

Sage resided at 234 St. Clair in Frankfort, near the old First Baptist church. The business section of the 1884–85 Frankfort directory lists J. L. Sage



B. C. Milam No. 4 reel from mid-1880s

For the most part, the store-bought tackle available to the mid-nineteenth-century angler was understandably sparse, because American tackle entrepreneurs like Thomas Chubb (discussed in Chapter 4) were just starting to implement mass production. To extend the sport's popularity, availability of fishing tackle in copious amounts was necessary, and the process to obtain it had definitely begun.

Beyond tackle, baitcasting needed a defined angling method and a strong cadre of avid, influential, and vocal adherents capable of spreading the new gospel of American sport fishing. The circumstances of the Civil War brought them together in Kentucky.

Chapter 8

EVOLUTION OF THE SHORT BAITCASTING ROD

1885 to 1920



The Baitcasting System

Accomplished twenty-first-century anglers often think in terms of a baitcasting system—a properly balanced rod, reel, line, and lures assembled to achieve certain desired results. The foundation of the system, the rod, is selected first, because it must fit the kind of fishing intended. The reel is chosen by how it fits the rod, the amount of line it must hold, and the drag system employed. Next, the line is matched to the rod and reel, taking into consideration its weight, diameter, and material. Lastly, lures are selected to complement all of the foregoing.

The objective of this chapter is to reveal the history of the “short” baitcasting rod, a rod form responsible for much of the early growth of the sport. Prior to World War I, the components of the baitcasting system did not necessarily evolve together in harmony; therefore, balancing certain combinations of constituent parts became an art rather than mere equipment selection.

In Kentucky during the early to mid-nineteenth century, anglers used live bait and a still-fishing technique. The standard equipment for the affluent Bluegrass anglers consisted of a Kentucky multiplying reel, usually lashed onto a supple ten- to twelve-foot top section of native cane rod (once common in the Southeastern states) with affixed standing line guides. The angler deployed a minnow with a sweeping, one-handed sidearm cast. This easy, graceful movement allowed live minnows, typically hooked through the lips, to remain undamaged. Dr. Henshall angled with just such a setup when he practiced medicine in Cynthiana, Kentucky, during the Civil War. By the early 1870s the single-piece cane rod was improved by fastening an upper 6½-foot portion of cane to a tapered wooden butt about twenty inches long. This provided a better-balanced rod (not top-heavy) with a stronger, easier-to-use handle.

Chapter 9

NOTEWORTHY BAITCASTING LURES

1883 to 1935



The First Plugs

During the mid-nineteenth century, the availability of artificial casting lures other than the variations of spoons and spinners was sparse. It is true that various English baits—such as the Phantom, usually made from a combination of metal and fabric—were available. Even American inventions, like Riley Haskell’s brass and copper trolling minnow, although rarely found, did exist. However, the hard-bodied wooden casting lures so familiar fifty years later, called “plugs” (so named for their cylindrical shape, like the plug of a wooden barrel), were virtually nonexistent. I have sometimes wondered who made the first of them and when.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century produced what numerous individuals consider to be the first artificial wooden lure: Harry Comstock’s Flying Hellgrammite, patented January 30, 1883, in New York. This classic, with a 2½-inch-long wooden body, employs a set of large nickel-plated metal wings just shy of two inches long. However, it is an imitation of the Eastern Dobsonfly and therefore is technically not a plug.

A second contender for the honor of the earliest plug lure comes from comments made by a highly reputable individual: J. M. Clarke, the tournament caster who designed the archetypal short rod produced by Fred Divine in 1885. Clarke, highly respected and well known for many years in the sports trade business, was definitely in a position to know when new lures hit the market. According to a 1918 article by Sam S. Stinson in *The American Angler*, Clarke believed the first commercially produced plug was Charles Shaffer’s lure, advertised as the Woods Expert Minnow, introduced commercially around 1885. Clarke recalled that it was a success from the start (109). However, other than Clarke’s statement, no documentation yet exists that Shaffer’s lure was the earliest plug produced.

Chapter 13

ANGLING BOATS AND MOTORS

1881 to 2016



Meeting the Demands of Anglers

Baitcasting is a widely diversified sport supported by watercraft that must meet the needs of many and varying individuals. The variety of waterborne craft should leave few anglers dry-docked for a lack of choice.

A good freshwater fishing boat has always been one that meets the demands of the individual angler. When choosing a boat in the twenty-first century, anglers often consider particulars such as type of water fished, the species sought, and the method of angling employed. In the case of baitcasting, the method frequently becomes a discriminating factor because casting an artificial lure all day requires a safe, stable, and comfortable platform. Modern anglers are fortunate; the variety of choices offered by boat manufacturers to meet individual preferences does not disappoint many.

One hundred plus years ago, early twentieth-century anglers faced radically different choices when considering watercraft, and their preferences in boats were often associated with the way in which they traveled to the fishing locale. American lakes and streams that provided the best angling were difficult to reach in 1900. Railroads and steamboats compensated for the lack of automobiles; but after disembarking at the final rail terminal or boat dock, the angler may have had to travel many more miles to reach the camp destination. Complicating matters: once the angler arrived, fishing boats or any type of watercraft might be scarce or nonexistent. The inspired solution was for the angler to take a boat along—obviously a complicated task.