The Historic Striped Bass

A Brief Introduction

by

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Sir John Jocelyn, sailing the New England coast line, during the first part of the 17th century, made a number of remarks about the Atlantic salmon which were included in his report to the English syndicate financing his explorations. He also witnessed the striped bass travelling in great schools, lashing the waters in their hungry chase for small forage fish. He saw them as savage predators, strong fighters in the nets of the few colonists who leaned heavily on the abundant marine fishes for survival. Undoubtedly, Jocelyn followed the Indian way of broiling his bass, enjoying the savory flavor whenever the opportunity offered. The striped bass is a succulent dish as the settlers from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to Florida soon learned and over the years, dependent on the location of the coastal settlements, it acquired a number of names including the rock, the rockfish, green head, squidhound, bar fish (along the St. Lawrence), streaked bass and finally striper. It's a coastal fish, spawning in tidal marshes and in fresh water. The present record weight is given by Francesca La Monte as 125 pounds. The rod and reel record, held by Frank Church from Vineyard Sound is 73 pounds established in 1913.

The icthyologist Walbaum named it *Roccus Saxatilis.* Dr. Samuel Mitchill made a first scientific inquiry noting that in summer or winter its habitat was generally inshore, seldom migrating far into the deeper waters of the ocean. Stating it was peculiar to America and naming it *PercaMitchilli.* Dr. Mitchill passed on in 1831,stopping any chance he might have had to refute D. J. V. C. Von Crowinshield Smith's changes in his "Fishes of Massachusetts." Smith defines the species as *Perca Labrax*, and is a little testy about Mitchill, asking by what authority he gave his own name to the striped bass: "he might have with equal propriety given his name to the white shark, or to the bones of a mastodon, and the last would have savored less of vanity, than affixing his cognomen to a common table fish known from time immemorial all over Europe."

The New York tackle dealer, John Brown, who wrote "The American Angler's Guide," (1845) in turn questions Smith observing that so important a game fish seems to have been completely unknown to the anglers of Europe, "for out of a hundred angling books, only one or two make mention of any kind of a bass whatever." Frank Forester (1849) called it by its most popular name, "Rock Fish or Bar Fish" quoting Richardson the British naturalist who had made studies in America and noted in addition Cuvier's *Labrax Lineatus.* Forester recommended trolling with a gaudy fly at the end of 300 feet of line which sent Thaddeus Norris (1864) in stitches. Norris went along with Cuvier as did another famous sportsman, Genio Scott, author of "Fishing American Waters," (1869). Scott makes the very interesting comment that he had caught stripers in Lake Ontario.

Brown notes that Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York, attributing the derivation of the word "basse" to the Dutch, meaning perch, and whatever the name, it mattered not as the fisherman had the game. "As an object of sport, for perfect symmetry, and beauty of appearance, and as a dish for the table, it is considered second only to the salmon." The accepted nomenclature is now striped bass, *Roccus Saxatilis,* (Walbaum.)

Recognition of the striped bass as a game fish is first recorded in *The American Turf Register* of November, 1829 with an article entitled "Trolling for Rock Fish in the Susquehanna." Spinning, natural minnows, anchovies and chubs were used for bait, trolled on linen or flax lines, the hooks long shanked and made especially for the river fishing by the local blacksmith. Because of the swift current, two oarsmen handled the shallow draft boat. Two trollers hand lined as the boat was rowed back and forth from shore to shore. It must have been an exciting sport for the fishing grounds were directly above a dangerous falls. The writer states that in an hour, from ten to twenty fish could be caught, weighing from 6 to 20 pounds.

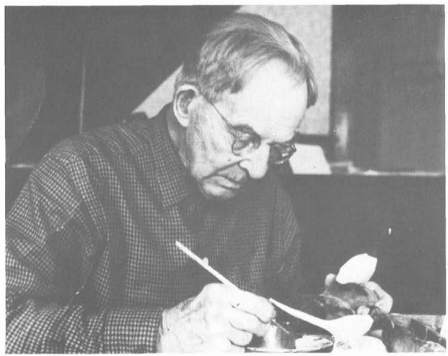
From 1829 to the present, our sporting literature centers mainly on bait fishing for the striped bass in both fresh and salt water, a period of over three centuries.

The first mention of striped bass fishing with a fly, (common usage of the term) was reported by Robert B. Roosevelt in his "Superior Fishing," 1865. Roosevelt was later to become Fish Commissioner of New York, proving to be hard nosed about stocking the Hudson River with Atlantic salmon until fishways were built for the possible spawning runs. In Washington during the Civil War, he often enjoyed the striped bass fishing along the Potomac, the better locations being toward the falls of that river near Chain Bridge. Lower down at Mount Vernon, George Washington had owned a fishery. Daniel Webster had also fished the striped bass with Charles Lanman, his Secretary, during the 1840's. For at least a half century, the Potomac had been a popular sporting ground for Washington anglers and the statesmen who frequented the capital on official business.

Roosevelt, a little of the snob, used the classic patterns for his striper fishing but eventually admitted the natives who fished the Potomac may have created something new for the fly fisher. He writes:

"Fly fishing for bass, however, is the perfection of the sport, and infinitely surpasses in excitement all other modes of killing those noble fish. The best season on the Potomac is in July or August, and the favorite hours the early morning or the twilight of the evening. The ignorant and debased natives who inhabit the romantic region of Tenally Town, about five miles northwest of Washington, and, who dead to the beauties of nature lavished around them, and utterly unacquainted with scientific angling, look merely to their two cents per pound for striped bass, manufacture a fly by winding red or yellow flannel around the shank of a large hook, adding sometimes a few white feathers. They substitute for rod a young cedar sapling, and attaching to the upper end a stout cord, fish with the large flannel swathed hook in the rapids and below the falls of the Potomac, at the old chain bridge, and without a reel, kill bass of twenty or thirty pounds.

"No spot can be imagined more wild and romantic, and with proper tackle, the reel, the little salmon rod and the artistic fly - no sport can be more exciting. The roar of the angry flood, the bare precipices topped with foliage on the opposite bank, the flat dry bed of the stream where it flows during the heavy freshets, but at other seasons, a mass of bare jagged rocks, and the dashing spray of the broken current, lend a



HAROLD N. GIBBS
1886 - 1970

Conservationist, fly fisher, self taught marine biologist and an officer in the Fish and Game Department of Rhode Island for many years, Harold Gibbs was the first to make fly rodding for striped bass popular. *photo by A. I. Alexander*

charm to the scene. While the fish, doubly powerful by the force of the stream and aided by the numerous rocks and falls, have every chance to escape.

"The bass pursue the silvery herring, which is the principle natural bait, and ascend the Little Falls of the Potomac during the summer months in vast numbers. They are captured in such numbers with the net in salt water and with hook and line in the rapids as to be almost a drug on the market.

"As the season advances, the native crawls upon some rock that reaches out into the stream, and with his coarse but elastic cedar pole, casts the roll of flannel, wrapped around a hook and misnamed a fly, into the seething current; and when the brave fish seizes the clumsy allurement, the fisherman contends for the mastery as best as he may, occasionally at the risk of a ducking consequent upon the subsequent and sudden breaking of his tackle and accompanied by considerable risk. Many are the tales of such accidents and now and then of fatal results. But with proper tackle, the scientific angler is master of the situation; he can reach any part of the current casting into the eddies at the base of the precipitous cliffs opposite; he can yield to the rush of the prey; can retire, paying out line, and can follow the fish along shore; and finally having subdued his spirit and broken his strength, can lead the prize gleaming through the transparent water with the sun reflected in rainbow colors from his scales into some quiet nook where he can gaff him with safety. Such is fly fishing for striped bass amid the most lovely scenery, gorgeous in its summer dress of green.

"Bass are taken at the Grand Falls, ten miles further up the river, but the Little Falls are their favorite locality, as they are just passing from the salt tide to the pure, sparkling fresh water. They frequently weigh twenty pounds and at times much more, but, the main run is smaller, and the number killed in lucky days is prodigious, being counted by the hundreds. Bass are said to be taken with a fly in other rivers of the southern states and also to a certain degree in the north. At the mouths of narrow inlets, where the tide is rapid and diluted with fresh water, a gaudy red and white fly with a full body, kept on the surface by the force of the current and not cast as in fly fishing, will occasionally beguile them; but generally speaking, bass are not fished with the fly north of the Potomac.

"Although the artistic angler naturally despises the flannel abortion manufactured by the stupid boors of Tennally Town, it will often be found as good a lure as though composed of the rarest materials; in fact, the bass exhibit none of the daintiness of choice that is universal with the salmon. So long as the fly is large and showy, they seem to be satisfied and their immense mouths can readily grasp a No. 7 hook, such as the natives use. One half that size is abundantly large, however, and the clearer the water, the finer the tackle. The rod, the reel and line are those appropriate to salmon fishing, although the line, if it is wet by salt water should be rinsed with fresh to prevent rotting. Some fishermen fasten a float above the fly, paying out line to let it run downstream to distant eddies; but this is not so orthodox a mode of proceeding, and does not require equal skill as delicate tackle."

Two decades later, the striped bass fishing along the entire Atlantic seaboad had so increased in popularity, and the success attending the artificial propagation of all game fishes so encouraging, Dr. Spencer Baird, the United States Fish Commissioner and one of his dynamic Fish Culturists, Livingston Stone, evolved the brilliant idea of planting Atlantic salt water game fish in the Pacific and eastern brook trout and other fresh water fishes in the streams of the Rocky Mountains. Stone designed a very elaborate "fish car" with a simple system to bring oxygen to the fish tanks. (1881) A train wreck negated this first attempt. A second attempt with striped bass

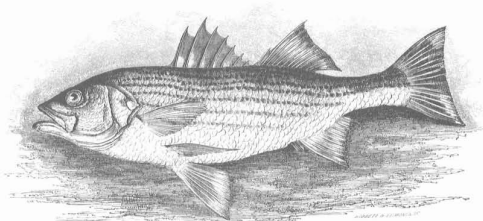
and eels was planned immediately.

July 17, 1882, J. G. Woodbury left Red Bank, New Jersey, with about 450 stripers and a small number of eels. Oxygen and fresh water was supplied by physical labor. A check at Philadelphia revealed fourteen dead bass. Nearing Council Bluffs, 16 more had expired and a few hours later due to using water from an artesian well another ten were lost. By Omaha a total of about one hundred and fifty had been lost. From Omaha, all was clear sailing. Fully three hundred stripers, from nine to six-and-one-half inches had survived the transcontinental journey of approximately seven days. The lively little fish were planted in Suison Bay below the junction of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers. The venture was a spectacular success and from this initial stocking, and later others, came the great striped bass fishing of the Northwest.

The late Harold N. Gibbs did much to popularize fly fishing for stripers along the New England coast. Harold was advancing in years, when just for kicks, he began bucktailing for the smaller stripers in the river at the back of his house in Barrington, Rhode Island. It was such a casual affair, he couldn't exactly remember the date, (about 1941), but by the 1950's, he had become the acknowledged authority and his Gibbs' Striper had become as well known as any of the popular hair winged flies used in fresh water.

Joe Brooks also pioneered the fly in salt water. Both he and Harold Gibbs made a number of contributions relating to the development of the salt water fly rod. For over two decades, Brooks held the record for stripers on the fly with a twenty-nine and 1/4 pounder from Coos Bay, Oregon. (1948) In 1970 Gerry L. Dyer landed a fish of 51½ lbs. This one, from the Smith River, also in Oregon, is considered the world's best. Without the vision of Spencer Baird and Livingston Stone, the magnificent striper fishing of the Northwest would never have become possible.

Sir John Jocelyn, the Indians, pioneer settlers and Victorians, found the striper great eating. Here is an 1849 *Sauce Matelot* to edge the savour: Peel about 20 button onions, then put about a teaspoonful of powdered suger in a stew pan, place it over a sharp fire, and when melted and getting brown, add a piece of butter the size of two walnuts, and your onions; pass them over the fire until rather brown; then add a glass of sherry, let it boil, then add a pint of brown sauce (beef au jus) and ten teaspoons of consomme; simmer at the corner of the fire until the onions are quite tender, skim it well; then add 20 small quenelles (a small meatball of chicken or veal), ten heads of mushrooms, and a teaspoonful of essence of anchovies, one of catsup, one of Harvey sauce and a little cayenne pepper.



STRIPED BASS.