

The Lake

By Chris Franklin

Some of the fondest memories from my childhood contain two key ingredients: the family and the lake. There is not a better place I know of to forget about the stress of everyday life, escape the hype of modern media and create a stronger bond with the people you care about.

As far back as I can remember we have gone to the lake for one reason or another. I want to share these experiences with my boys and create memories they can look back on for a lifetime, so I continue the tradition. This year was no exception.

School had only been out for a week and the kids were already starting to get bored, then Grandma called. There was the normal, boring, obligatory chit chat at first. How's the weather out there? How're the kids? It was the same as always. Eventually she got around to the point of the call, the part I had been waiting for. "We're planning to go to the lake next weekend." she said. "Do you all want to come down?"

"Yeah, Michelle has to work but, the kids have been begging to go for the last week." I replied.

"Well, in that case, Grandpa and I will get some things caught up around here and we'll just plan to stay the whole week, if that's all right with you."

"That sounds good to me! I'm sure Michelle will enjoy a week to herself too. We'll see you Saturday," I said with enthusiasm.

The next week was filled with anticipation. Each day we'd do something in preparation for our trip. One day we dug out the fishing poles. Another day we gathered the tackle boxes, then sorted the hooks and lures. We packed the suit cases and searched for the lanterns. Finally on the last day we packed everything in the van and made the trip to the lake.

We could see the water through the trees as we came down the last hill. Daisy and Tracker came out to meet us as we turned in to the driveway. They are my cousin's Labs. Daisy is a friendly, easy going

old girl whose fur is nearly white. Tracker on the other hand is all black and all boy. He's too excitable, too rough with the kids and he likes to jump on people. My cousin Cheryl and her husband Dan, live at the lake year round but they had left earlier that day to go to a wedding in Colorado. They left the dogs out to roam around but we put them in their pen so they wouldn't be under our feet as we unloaded the vans. Once that chore was done we let the dogs out. Tracker took off in to the woods to do whatever dogs do in the woods. Daisy decided to hang out around the house. She was lying on the porch just watching us when Michael though it would be a good idea to try to ride her. She wasn't going to be ridden though. She's no horse! She did lay still and acted like she didn't even notice him as he climbed over her one way then again from the other side. He tried to roll her over but a one year old boy is no match for a full grown dog. She stayed right where she was.

The dog and baby show was great entertainment for Grandma and me but Michael's brothers couldn't care less about that. They were only interested in the water just a few feet away. They were headed to the docks when Grandpa hollered at them. "You boys get back here! You don't go down there without life jackets!"

"Ok." they moaned, as they walked back to the house to get their life jackets. Grandma helped William get his on while Matthew struggled to put his on by himself.

Now that they were safe, Grandpa walked them down to the docks. While they were exploring the place to see what was there for them to get in to, Grandpa was inspecting everything. First he walked out on the swim dock on the north end, and then headed south to walk around the bass boat. Nothing out of place there so he continued to the pontoon. It was not in the best shape. I could hear him cussin' down there so I went to see what the matter was. It seemed that someone had taken it out, most likely to Party Cove, and didn't bother cleaning it too well. To make the problem worse, they had broken the cover off the radio and left the gas tank empty. It was not really that big a deal though, we had planned to wash it anyway. I told Grandpa I would continue the dock inspection if he'd help the boys. They had found the fishing tackle in the closet and started dragging poles out on to the dock. I knew that would take his mind off the pontoon. I made a quick pass around the other boats, a 38 foot cruiser, a 24 foot ski boat, two Jon

boats, and several Seadoos. I checked all the baskets for fish as I made my rounds too. Everything looked ok so I joined Grandpa and the boys on the party dock. The boat docks are plain, modern, steel and concrete structures made for boat storage and nothing else. The party dock, in contrast, is an old wooden dock. It was built many years ago and has a lot of old lake charm. Its painted pale yellow, has a shingled roof with an open ceiling, and cheesy red globe party lights strung around the sides. I like to listen to the boards creak as the wind blows or it bobs up and down in the water. There is a refrigerator, a bar, a picnic table, a charcoal grill, a diving board on one end and an assortment of cheap plastic chairs scattered around. It's probably my favorite place in the world. There aren't too many of these old docks around anymore and the ones that are left don't have much time. They will be outlawed soon in an effort to make the lake safer and more environmentally friendly. It's kind of sad but I'm glad the boys got a chance to spend time on it before it's replaced with a boring new dock. I just hope they can remember it like I do in years to come.

Grandpa had put a stop to the fishing tackle mess before it got out of hand. He got each of the boys a pole out and tied a hook on one. I tied a hook on the other and helped the boys toss their hooks in the water. I didn't have a fishing license yet so, to avoid any trouble with the law I left Grandpa and the boys on the dock and went to check on Grandma and the baby. Michael was playing with his toys in the living room floor and Grandma was getting things ready for an early dinner. "What do you want to eat tonight?" she asked.

"I don't care, what do we have in the fridge?" I replied.

"I thought we could grill some burgers." She continued. "I'll cut up some onions and tomatoes. We can have chips and maybe some pork and beans."

"That sounds good to me." I said. "I'll go start the fire."

After dinner, Grandpa and I hopped in the van and went up to the little gas station slash bait shop out on the highway. I got my fishing license, some worms and a six pack of Bud Light. When we returned to the house, Grandma had Michael in his bed, Matthew in his pajamas, and William in the tub. She is so much better with them than me. Grandpa and I sat on the porch. We talked and drank a beer while

watching the yellow glow of the sun fade to red, and then purple over the hill on the other side of the lake. At last everyone went to bed and dreamed of the fish we'd catch the next day.

I woke up at about 5:30 Monday morning. The sun wasn't up yet but the sky was getting lighter. I walked out on the porch and lit the first cigarette of the day. Daisy and Tracker heard me come out and started stirring around in their houses. I sat down and listened to the birds as they began chirping around me. I watched the early morning light start to sparkle on the smooth water. I was just raising my cigarette to my mouth when I heard a splash of water. I turned and saw the tail fin of an unidentifiable fish slap the water. That was the sign I was looking for. The fish were up too. I crushed out my cigarette and headed to the dock.

I grabbed a pole, tied on a jig head, and selected a purple and white plastic tube body to slip on to the jig head hook. I dropped the hook in the water and waited for it to sink to the bottom. Once the hook was on the bottom of the lake I started slowly reeling it back to the surface. Nothing happened. I tried again and got the same result. I continued like this for quite a while, trying different spots around the dock.

I had plenty of time that morning to think about the times I had been fishing with my dad. I remembered my first catfish from Grandpa's pond, the time dad jumped up and down in the creek waving his arms around like a wild man to chase off a snake and taking a chance of getting bitten himself to protect my brothers and me, my first and only small mouth bass from the Big River near Saint Louis, and the time we entered an amateur Bass tournament and had a great time despite finishing next to last.

I finally decided that the old crappie fishing method wasn't going to work that day. I cut the jig from my line then tied an Aberdeen hook on the end. I placed a lead sinker about an inch above the hook and a red and white bobber about three feet above that. I took a night crawler out of the Styrofoam box and cut him in one inch pieces. I poked a piece of worm on to the hook and tossed the rig about fifteen feet out from the dock toward the shore. I watched the bobber and waited patiently. After a few minutes I thought I saw the bobber move ever so slightly. Had it moved or was it an illusion of the low light on the water? I watched even more closely and waited. A few seconds passed by and the bobber moved again.

This time I was sure it moved. It went almost completely under. I waited. A few more seconds, which seemed like an eternity, passed and the bobber went under again. This time it didn't come back up. I watched as it went deeper and deeper under the water and as the last bit of slack in the line was pulled into the water I yanked the pole back quickly and forcefully over my shoulder. I had him hooked! I reeled the line in carefully. I didn't want him to get away. He swam violently back and forth through the water, first one way then another. I continued to reel in the line while trying to guide the fish away from obstacles in the water with the pole. I could see that I had a little channel cat when he broke the surface of the water, rolling and splashing about. I knew he'd get off if I let him do that for long so I grabbed the line and pulled him quickly but gently over the rail of the dock. I removed the hook from his mouth, and looked him over, carefully sizing up my little opponent. He was dark gray with a hint of green on top and had a white belly. He was maybe two or three pounds, just about the right size for the frying pan. I could hear the boys coming down from the house as I placed him in a basket dangling in the water from the side of the dock. They were anxious to go fishing, and that meant my fishing was over for now. It was time for me to be the dad and help create memories for them to look back on when they are dads, as I had done that quiet, early summer morning.

William caught his first fish ever that same morning, another little catfish and Matthew caught his biggest fish yet, a huge drum. We caught many more fish over the course of the week. We went on boat rides. We even went swimming with the ducks every afternoon, but that morning when we all caught a special fish was the best day of the summer.