

Valley Angler

An Old Tackle Box

by Bill Thompson

The interesting thing about fishing is all of the fascinating avenues that it can lead you to. Fishing is far more complicated than just catching fish. One avenue is the collecting of old or antique fishing gear. In the last few years the hobby has grown in leaps and bounds. Not that long ago it was possible to purchase an old rod or reel at a yard sale for a few pennies, but today even the most naive weekend entrepreneur is savvy enough to realize that old fishing gear may be worth big bucks.

As a fly fisherman naturally I have always had a weakness for old bamboo fly rods. However, never having the cash required to own one of these lovely wands I have always steered clear of entering the market. The same holds true for reels, however I have managed to piece together a small collection of less expensive ones. My major weakness has always been old fly fishing books; in this area of collecting I have, on occasion, managed to break the bank once or twice.

Conventional fishermen are not immune from the collecting addiction and in fact can be just as fanatical as any fly fisherman. The collecting of old fishing plugs is an area that has always interested me. When it comes to inventiveness there is no lack of inspiration on the part of fishermen when it comes to thinking up new ways to fool fish with an artificial lure. Casual visitors to our shop often ask how many different fly patterns there are. I always answer with one word, “countless” and the same holds true for the number of different lures that spin fishermen have come up with in the past couple of hundred years.

Lures come in several different varieties, including spinners, spoons and plugs. Plugs are the ones that capture my interest, especially the older wooden ones. Judging by the price that some of these bring I would guess that I am not alone on this. Wooden lures in good condition can bring upwards to a thousand dollars or more.

Now before you rush off to raid Dad’s tackle box it is important to note that there are several variables that determine the worth of an old lure. Like a lot of collectibles the brand name makes a big difference. Any antique dealer will tell you that there is a big difference between a Tiffany Lamp and say another lamp of

the same vintage purchased at the Five and Dime store. Names to look for are Heddon, South Bend, Creek Chub, Paw Paw, Shakespeare, and Pflueger. There are others, but these are a few of the more popular especially the Heddon Company. Most of these companies are still in business today and needless to say today's lures have not yet reached collectable status. What most collectors are looking for are the old wooden ones. Long before plastic your grandfather pitched lures made from balsa and bass wood. The first of these lures were hand made by individuals for their own enjoyment later giving rise to the manufactured ones. The founder of the Heddon Company, James Heddon, was one of those tinkerers that found a market for his homemade plugs and the rest is history. One category of lure collecting is seeking out these home built lures and they are often referred to as "Folk Art". There is some interest in early plastic lures so don't be too hasty to pass them by.

Like all antiques value is greatly enhanced by condition. It is possible to find a lure of great value, but because it was fished hard and shows the wear may be only worth a small portion of the same lure new and in the box. A good original box can add a great deal to the value.

If you do find a few old lures in some forgotten tackle box in the attic it is probably a good idea to have someone with some knowledge on the subject take a look at them. The internet is a good starting point as there are several sites dedicated to collecting antique fishing tackle. A few of these sites will actually give you an appraisal. You simply post a picture and a description on the web site and they will do the rest. Antique dealers, unless they specialize in tackle, are not the best way to go. If by chance you think you have something really good you might want to consider Lang's Sporting Collectibles of Waterville New York. Lang's is without doubt the best auction house to deal with when it comes to antique tackle. They run two auctions each year in Boxborough, Massachusetts; the next one will be this coming November. In the past years they have set several records for the highest prices paid in several categories of antique tackle. Some may remember the famous Haskel Baby Minnow which brought over \$18,000 in a recent auction; as it received national media attention.

From time to time someone will bring a treasure into our shop for a appraisal. This is something that I personally enjoy very much. I always explain up front that I am in no way a professional appraiser and I never charge for the service. I do have a fair working knowledge and keep a small library of auction catalogs and other books on the subject as a reference. For the most part I see a lot of tackle with far more sentimental value than monetary. This is of course is to be expected

as something wouldn't be rare if there were lots of them. However, on occasion someone will bring in something that does have value and in these cases I generally recommend a licensed appraiser or Lang's.

Just this past week a fellow who Janet had guided just a few days before brought in a bamboo rod for me to look at. He had brought it on E-bay with the idea he might fish it. Unfortunately the rod was of little value. He said that he had something else that he had purchased along with the rod that might be of some interest. He went back out to his truck and returned with an old wooden tackle box.

The second he walked back through the door with the box I knew he had a treasure even if the box was empty. The box is just over sixteen inches long, ten inches wide and eight inches deep. There is a door pull type handle on the top and the hasp serves to keep the box closed. A piece of heavy wire serves as the lock. It is painted black and was obviously hand made by a craftsman. My guess is that someone with out a whole lot of money saw a manufactured tackle box and knew he could do better for a less. And to my way of thinking he did.

When you first open up an old rod tube or an old tackle box the first thing that hits you is the smell. OK, some would just say that it is a rather obnoxious musty odor, but I prefer to think of it as the first hint of some uncovered treasure of the past. In this case it was. The box had several layers of trays designed to hold lures and other tackle and each tray held a separate treasure.

In the bottom were several old reels. There were three bait casting reels and three old fly reels. Of course the first thing I picked up was the fly reels, one of which was a nice old Hardy Uniqua.

This reel alone more than made up for the original purchase price of thirty-six bucks. The other reels were of lesser value, but none the less they were still very collectable. It was the plugs, however, that turned out to be the most interesting.

Several of the plugs were just the wooden blanks and like the box were hand made. A few of the others were from manufacturers. The nicest was a large pike lure from the Creek Chub Company. Another nice bass plug was from Paw Paw Company. There were also a dozen or so very early plastic lures and a few large wooden bobbers. Who ever owned this box was not opposed to using different methods to catch fish. If all the items in the box came from the same original owner then he was truly a renaissance man. Not only was he a fine craftsman, but he was also willing to experiment with different types of tackle.

The man who had purchased the box was also a very interesting man as well. As Janet and I pawed through the box and thumbed through pages of books on old tackle to find prices on the items in the box his enthusiasm for the stuff was as great as ours. He explained that he was a machinist by trade and just loved old wooden tool boxes which was why he had brought the box to begin with. He said that he had a house full of them. I replied that my grandfather had been a machinist also and that I had some of his old tool boxes. The man was leaving for home and started to head out the door. Janet and I started to frantically pack up the box. He said to us, "why don't you guys just keep the box" as he started for the truck. We both told him that we thought the box and its contents was much too valuable to just give away, but he insisted. I know that Janet and I stood there with open mouths for a few minutes still not grasping what had just happened.

The problem with things like this is that you always see the dollar signs, but in the end you never have the heart to break it up or part with it. The box is now on permanent display at the North Country Angler Museum of Fishing Tackle.

See you on the river