

A Summer Day on the Shores of Half Moon

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Words and memories by Brad Mueller

Image: Half Moon Lake, by Aaron Carlson

Growing-up on the Eastside Hill, and in Eau Claire generally, provided truly special opportunities for summertime childhood activities and adventures. I remember a special fishing excursion off the Hill ...

I had fished Half Moon Lake many times from about the age of four on with my Dad and younger brother. Mostly with cane poles. My Mom would occasionally tag along purely as a spectator as an excuse to spend time with her family. I was about eleven or twelve years old (1971-1973) when-after what seemed like years of lobbying my parents-I was finally given the green light to ride my bike from our Eastside Hill home to Half Moon Lake in Carson Park to fish, without adult supervision. A major benchmark of independence as I approached my teen years.

One such Half Moon fishing trip included myself, my brother and a fishing buddy of mine from the Hill. We prepared for a full day of fishing by throwing together a lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and several cans of off-brand pop, probably Shasta, purchased from the Red Owl. No coolers. Each fisherman put together his own bare bones tackle box; a small clear plastic container with dividers, consisting of an assortment of small pan fish hooks, red and white bobbers and split shot sinkers. We packed our lunches, tackle, stringers and empty tin cans (for worms) into old Boy Scout and army surplus backpacks. Each of us had a rod equipped with a simple, durable Zebco spin cast

reel. We brought a small folding camp shovel to dig-up worms for bait once we arrived at Carson Park .

Once the gear was packed, we hopped on our lime green Huffy bikes with banana seats and high rise handle bars and headed west, downhill. Our poles rested across the handle bars and were held by simultaneously gripping the plastic grips and a section of the rod.

The trip to Carson Park was a breeze, mostly downhill. Our route took us down Barland Street, over to Gray, then to Dewey, onto Lake , across the river to Fifth and west on Water Street which turned into Menomonie Street and Carson Park's southwest entrance. Unfortunately, for young fisherman, there was no Dairy Queen strategically located at the park entrance in the early 1970s. The Eastside Hill was home to Eau Claire's only DQ.

Less than a block after turning onto Carson Park Drive, we laid our bikes and gear at the roadside and dug for worms in the loose, black soil in low area on the east side of the road. In fifteen, twenty minutes tops, our tin cans were full with a handful of soil and more than enough worms to last the entire day.

Our favorite Half Moon Lake fishing spots were Braun's Bay and the spot we chose this particular day- the bay just off Menomonie Street, located across the road from the worm supply. There were narrow paths on the low south shoreline which cut through the cattails, tall reeds and grasses. There was enough open shoreline from which to fish without constantly getting tangled in the vegetation. Even so, we managed to lose our fair share of hooks and bobbers trying to cast our lines to the perfect spot; which was always happened to be guarded by the most inconveniently positioned branch or bush.

The workmen from the industrial building or warehouse located between the shoreline and Menominee Street gladly welcomed us into the building to get a cold drink from the water fountain (warm orange Shasta quickly loses its refreshing quality). I think the workmen envied our Huck Finn existence which reminded them of their own carefree boyhoods.

The thing about fishing on Half Moon Lake, which I believe is still true today, is that it was not very hard to catch all the stunted sunfish (bluegills) you could possibly want. All one needed was a very small hook tipped with a worm or almost any other organic substance. It was almost impossible to catch a sunfish actually big enough to keep- at least by my Father's standards.

Size did not matter this particular trip. We were on a mission for fish to fry. Over the course of the day, one by one, miniature sunfish were placed on our stringers. The sharp end of each stringer was pushed into the ground or tied to a low-hanging branch at water's edge as we moved around the shoreline so that the growing stringer of fish could be kept somewhat alive in the water. We caught, and kept, a pile of under-sized sunfish- mostly the pumpkin seed variety.

After a full day of worm-digging, fishing, hiking, and other harmless boy stuff; we headed for home with our full-to-capacity stringers of less than fresh fish. The late afternoon bike ride home was a struggle. In addition to carrying a fishing rod, a stringer of fish dangled across our handle bars. Already exhausted, we were faced with the mostly uphill return trip. I'm pretty sure that the ride home took twice as long as in the morning. There was much uphill bike pushing. Barely surviving the marathon trip home, we dragged ourselves into our backyard.

As most people learn at an early age, every peaceful, lazy day comes with a price. This day cost us a couple of tedious hours of cleaning aquarium-size sunfish with adult-sized fillet knives on the backyard picnic table. We survived and the bite-sized fillets were frozen for consumption on a rainy day.

A day or two after this particular Half Moon trip, a column by Jim Fisher, outdoor columnist at the time, appeared in the Eau Claire Leader-Telegram entitled "Fishermen usually safe from trouble." In the second half of the column, Mr. Fisher described seeing three young men riding their bicycles down Menomonie Street on their way to fish at Half Moon. Although the column did not specifically identify us, it would have been too much of a coincidence for the boys Mr. Fisher described to have been anyone but us. My mother clipped and saved the column; a copy of the clipping she has saved all these years is shown below.



