

October 5, 2000

# FIFTY-TWO SMALLMOUTH, ONE WALLEYE, TWO ROCKBASS AND MARIE ANTOINETTE

The Susquehanna River is shaped like a huge, crinkled Y across the face of Pennsylvania.

The lower Susquehanna, from Sunbury through Harrisburg, is the bottom stem, the base of the mighty river before it enters the Chesapeake Bay. At Sunbury the river splits left and right. The left forks runs out to Williamsport, Loch Haven, Renovo and beyond, and is officially known as the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.

The right-side branch travels north past Bloomsburg and the Berwick Nuclear Power Plant, then curves up to the look-alike cities of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. Actually before it hits Scranton, the river makes a substantial turn to the northwest, as if to tell the twin towns, "I've have enough of your industrial waste, I'm heading back up to the country." This entire arm is known as the North Branch.

through any boat-tipping rapids, and nobody shot at us from the banks. But we saw two gliding eagles, and would you believe there's a scenic overlook on the river known as the "Marie Antoinette Overlook."

As Dunham explained, the French aristocrat had intended to set foot in the States and settle near the North Branch. A bunch of her friends even preceded her to this section of Pennsylvania. But alas, in 1793, poor Marie lost her head and her foot never made it to Bradford County.

Too bad, she missed some great fishing.

Using jigs, minnows plugs and some topwater lures, Dunham put us on 52 smallmouth, one walleye and two rockbass during our eight-hour float. We rung up this substantial tally even after suffering through a slow morning, due

spit out crayfish when we lifted them out of the water.

In addition to the crayfish forage, a large glacier rock, a local monument known as "Standing Stone," was covered with Dobson fly (hellgrammite) egg cases as well as carved names from the late 1800's and early 1900's. But no Marie Antoinette.

This year, Dunham is on track to catch nearly 5,000 smallmouth

strong birthing in 1999 will do the same for several seasons to come.

On our float I caught one walleye, by accident, but I saw several swim along with my catch while reeling it in. Dunham noted that as the autumn settles in, walleye fishing will get hot. For starters, the water temperature has to drop below 70 degrees for the fish to get active. On the North Branch cold water and cold weather are good

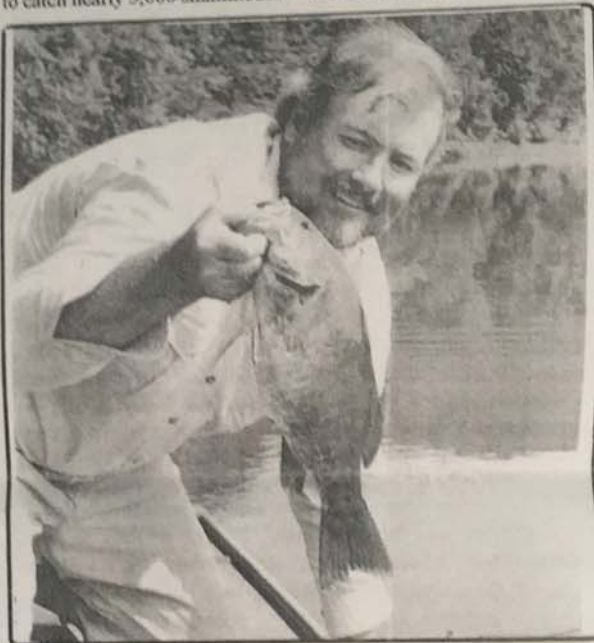
shallow riffles under a bright sun.

What surprised me on this float was how the bass rose from such a wide variety of structure. We took them along banks, at the base of islands, beside shoreline riprap left from a old canal, in tailouts. About the only place the bass didn't bite was in deep, slow-moving water with little rock or rubble. We even caught smallmouth in places I'd never think to catch smallmouth. As we floated over "heavy water," several feet deep and with a strong river current — the kind of spot you'd expect to raise trout — we took a number of good bass. Indeed this bit of structure, only one of two like it I remember on the trip, actually held a rainbow trout for Dunham last spring.

In addition to the boat ride, Dunham offers clients a cabin along the river. It's comfortable, well-lit and heated. Hard to ask for more.

Dunham can be reached through his L.D. Guide Service, Rt. 87N, Carpenter Street, Dushore, Pa. 18614, or call 570-928-9522 or 570-363-2810 between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. E-mail: LD\_Guide@sosbbs.com. He appears annually at the Allentown sport show.

In addition to bass and walleye, Dunham offers deer hunts and fully guided spring and fall turkey hunts. And here's the kicker, his son, who designed the company's web page, is also the mayor of his town, population 350.



with his clients. That might seem like a lot of bass, and it is, but during the drought last season, he was able to nab close to 7,000 smallmouth when the fish were concentrated in the oxygenated riffles.

The numbers are correct because as a registered guide with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission — the only one on the North Branch — he turns in tally sheets each year.

You might wonder if, after catching all those bass, Dunham has time to do anything else. Well, amazingly, smallmouth bass are not the only North Branch fish he pursues. In the early spring and fall, Dunham concentrates on the great walleye fishing in the upper river. (He also owns a tackle shop and another small business.)

Yes, the North Branch has some fine walleye fishing. According to PFB&C field reports, a strong birthing of walleye in 1995 has provided "some exceptional walleye fishing" and that another

for walleye. From mid-October to ice-up is tops.

"The rule of thumb up here is, the worse you feel, the better they bite," Dunham said.

But back to the bass. On our float last week, the smallmouth respond best to jigs adorned with three-inch twister tail grubs and also No. 5 Countdown Rapalas. We used a black, eighth-ounce jig with various grub colors. The overall winner was a dark pumpkin made by Berkley. Both Dunham and I used this to catch most of our bass. But during the afternoon, I grew weary of two anglers using the same bait, so I looked in Lance's tackle boxes and found a pumpkin-bodied grub with a fluorescent orange tail, the orange mimics the claws of a crayfish.

At first this grub color did not produce, but when we moved into deeper, darker water, the bait took off. Also as the day lengthened, my brighter bait scored big. The Rapala worked best in skinny water and was the hot lure through

## Nature-Bound by Vic Attardo

It's when the North Branch crosses the Luzerne-Wyoming County line and continues northwest into Bradford County and the New York state border that the Susquehanna becomes as rural and as rugged as the river we all saw in the movie, "Deliverance."

Well, I exaggerate a little. On a 15-mile float with guide Lance Dunham, from the ramps at Wysox to Terrytown, we didn't slide

to bright blue skies and falling water temperatures.

Our biggest bass of the day was a bruising 17-incher, as healthy as any fish you'd get around Harrisburg. (The true fishermen won't be grossed out by the following statement, but the casual reader might consider jumping to the next paragraph.) I can say these bass were healthy and well feed because some of them pooped and

## - A MODEST PROPOSAL -

The implementation of Big Bass regulations on the lower Susquehanna has gone a long way in improving the quality of fishing on the river. The size of the Harrisburg bass has further defined the water as a world class fishery.

Unfortunately, the North Branch does not have the same regulations. In Bradford County the minimum summer length is 12, not 15 inches. Thus the number of trophy fish on this portion of the river is not as substantial, though it's still impressive.

To qualify for Big Bass regulations, the Fish and Boat Commission must first study the water and judge such factors as water quality, fish growth rate and fishing pressure. Clearly, all of the North Branch, particularly the section around Bloomsburg and Berwick, would not stand the test of these factors. But from what I saw of the quantity, quality and food base of the North Branch in Bradford County, the Fish and Boat Commission might consider implementing Big Bass regulations between, at least, Wysox and Terrytown. If they have rejected the idea, it would be good to publish their findings on the web page or in the commission's magazine.

Even Bradford County's only guide on the North Branch would like to see Big Bass regulations.

- Vic Attardo

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