

When Buck Perry, the father of structure fishing, began his life-long mission of teaching fishermen to improve their fishing success (he began this project over 40 years ago), his voice was like a voice in the wilderness. Very few would listen to his message; and the few who listened didn't "hear" what he said.

It was Buck Perry who first gave fishermen the language of modern-day fishing when he coined such words as "structure," "breaks," "breaklines," "sanctuary," "migration route," "speed and depth control," "contact point," "scatter point," etc., etc. His discoveries about fishing and the movements of game fish have become an integral part of many writers' and fishermen's approach to successful fishing. For thousands of anglers, "structure fishing" has become the cornerstone of fishing achievement and excellence.

Years ago the true facts of fishing were neither known, believed, nor desired. The same holds true in many areas, even to this day. In this exclusive interview, *Fishing Facts* Managing Editor, Carl Malz, attempts to reach into the past with Buck Perry. In this two-part article (originally published as a single-feature article in the June, 1976 issue of *Fishing Facts*) Malz and Perry discuss many of Perry's early-day experiences and the varying attitudes en-

Part One of Two INTERVIEW WITH

A TRUE LIVING LEGEND

The 'Daddy' of structure fishing stresses the point that the true facts of fishing rarely change.

countered at that time.

Today, the teachings and discoveries of Buck Perry are commonly recognized as the true beginning of our modern era of sportfishing. He is forever enshrined in the National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame, and one of Larry Colombo's elite "Living Legends of American Sportfishing."

QUESTION: *Let's talk about the early days of bass fishing and your experi-*

ences when you first went into the field many years ago. Let's discuss the typical bass fisherman in those early days, and maybe a good place to begin would be the first time you left home to promote Spoonplugging, and to teach the "gospel" of structure fishing.

PERRY: Gosh, Carl, that's so far back I can't recall everything that well. You've read some of the things I said about the early years, as far back as the

1920s. It was a long time ago . . . but probably you had in mind when I first looked at the commercial aspect of sportfishing. As far as preaching the "gospel" (of angling) . . . it was in my early teens, right on up until I finished school. But I really began to promote structure fishing seriously shortly after World War II.

QUESTION: *What did you encounter*
continued

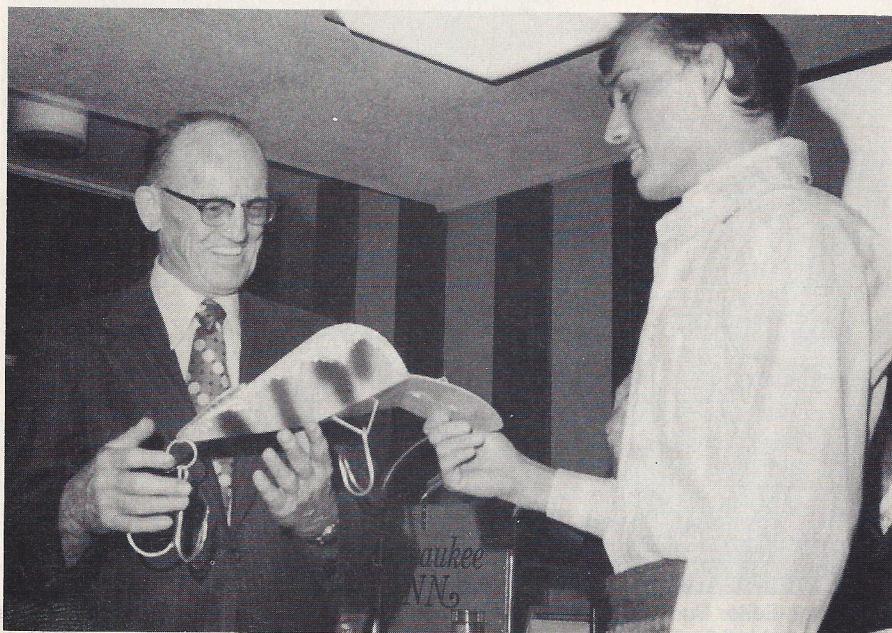


Education Editor Buck Perry; 74 years young, and still going as strong as anglers half his age. *Fishing Facts* Managing Editor Carl Malz says, "When you step in the boat with Buck Perry, you better be ready to put in several lengthy days of very long hours."

LIVING LEGEND

in the field at that time? What were the majority of bass fishermen doing? Was it anything like you might find today?

PERRY: No! Today we have a lot of fishermen who are *beginning* to fish a little differently than they did years ago. But when I first went out into the field, the things I did and the things I said came as a complete surprise to most fishermen. I can recall when I might be trolling quite fast and I'd see fishermen looking at me. They would see me going by, and they would all comment, and have a big laugh. Of course, I came in contact with this attitude many times when I got back to the dock also. People would ask me, "You weren't actually trolling, were you?"



Buck Perry accepts a giant replica of a Spoonplug lure made by one of his young student admirers.

Then many times, and this especially stands out in my memory . . . I would be anchored quite a long ways from shore and I would be casting. This *really* brought a lot of laughter.

QUESTION: *You mean they wondered what you were doing way out there far from the shoreline?*

PERRY: Yes. They wondered what that stupid jerk was doing out there in the center of the lake casting for bass. The normal way to fish in those days was fishing with live bait and artificials around the shorelines. My first work, of course, was with bass fishermen because that was the part of the country I lived in. There were other species, too, but I found out at an early age that the bass was a key to successful fishing. I found out in the early days there was very little known about the schooling nature of fish, and that the bass didn't

live under some lily pad or weed or log. Many had the idea that, as he got older, the bass was a Lone Ranger or something of this nature. Fishermen had no idea of what good (fishing) weather was or what bad weather was. In fact, if you could look back you would see that the fishing I faced back in those days, about everything I did or said was the reverse of what was taking place and what was written or preached.

Instead of fishing slow, I said you might have to fish fast. When most fishermen were fishing towards the shoreline, I said to fish away from the shoreline. Instead of fishing around bushes, I told them they might have to fish out where there were no bushes. So almost everything I said was a bit different than they had heard. I was preaching

rougher weather was better fishing weather than a bright, beautiful day. I was saying big fish are school fish and the deep water is the home of the fish. This *really* brought a lot of scoffing and laughter. So, actually what I was doing, and what I was saying, were things that were *completely* different from what they had been exposed to. I would tell them to do this and they had been doing something else.

This went on for quite a long time, but shortly after World War II (I had saved a few bucks during the war) . . . well, I shot that pretty quick trying to teach fishermen how to catch fish. I could catch the fish, but it took me quite a while to find out the best way to get the message across to the fishermen. I really never did find the solution . . . regardless of the amount of fish I caught, I could rarely get the guy to *hear* what

I said because he was always looking for something else.

QUESTION: *Buck, what area of the United States did you first try to get the message across? Where did you begin?*

PERRY: In the Southeast. Basically I started in North Carolina. All during the development of my ideas of Spoonplugging I had done a lot of fishing in different areas. But when I went at it from a commercial standpoint, I began in the Southeast, primarily. Not only do I think this was the wrong place . . . but even today, I think it is still one of the toughest places to get the message across. There are a lot of factors involved in this, but in the Southeast, if you want to name the states, they are: North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, parts of Mississippi, and Florida. Most of the season was spent in the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, parts of South Carolina, and most of the colder season was spent down in Florida.

QUESTION: *Did you get anybody to listen to you?*

PERRY: Very, very few. Some listened because I shook them up (by catching fish). You might say that, at first, I tried to do it by just talking and not doing a lot of fishing. That was in the very beginning. But then I soon realized that I had to catch a lot of fish if I were to get their attention. So I went on the fishing trail. There was always *somebody* to listen. Those that saw me actually catch fish weren't too skeptical, although I did have a lot of people say, "I'm standing here watching you, but I don't believe it." But the number of skeptics, outside of those who were actually there, were many.

And so it became necessary to try to get people who would help spread the word, or help me spread the word. And, as you recall, that's why I went to the outdoor writers, radio, and of course, later on, TV was coming into its own, so I went to the TV people. But I would take these people out and say, "Come on, let's go fishing," and I'd show 'em what it was all about. But this was a very difficult thing to do. There was no problem selling tackle because this fit in with what the fishermen were looking for. I made tackle and sold a lot of tackle. That's what kept me going.

So then I spent years and years (9 to 10) in the Southeast and other areas, primarily just doing this commercial type of "preaching" of Spoonplugging. It was in the '50s before I went into other areas of the country, and especially the Midwest.

QUESTION: *Why do you think there was so much resistance in the areas that you started in? Was it the fact that the people had fairly good fishing lakes and were able to catch fish?*

PERRY: Yes, I think one of the reasons it was quite difficult in the Southeast is

the fact that they did (and still do) have a lot of good fishing. During that period of time there were a lot of fish. There weren't many water skiers, and the laws were quite liberal. It is a little different in the Southeast than it is in many other parts of the country. If a man wants to go fishing, he doesn't have to make a long plan. After work he just goes fishing, and if the fish aren't hitting in one lake, he goes over to another lake. And he can go from a seasonal standpoint. There is so much water available. They catch quite a lot of fish. But as you know, fishing is relative, even with all the catching of fish.

"People wondered what that stupid jerk was doing out there in the center of the lake, casting for bass."

You can always shake them up, because you've never seen a fisherman that didn't want to catch more fish.

QUESTION: *So it wasn't until the '50s that you went to other areas where perhaps the fishing wasn't so easy?*

PERRY: That's right.

QUESTION: *And these people, in the tough fishing areas, did they begin to listen to what you had to say?*

PERRY: Yessir.

QUESTION: *Where was that?*

PERRY: Well, the most outstanding one that I remember was in Chicago in 1957. There were other areas, but this is one that stands out because there was a great reception for what I had to say.

QUESTION: *What did you encounter in Chicago back in the late '50s?*

PERRY: I have to go back just a little bit farther than the late '50s. During the process of this promotional type fishing, I ran into a lot of people from the North. During that time I seemed to get a little more interest from the people in the North than I did in the South. What brought me to the Midwest, I might say, was due to a few fellows who had gotten the message. They lived in the North. They had all come back home from fishing in the South and had applied the knowledge they had gained. They kept after me to come to their home area and see what I could do.

So in '57 I came up North and found that the lakes were a little bit scarce in the near vicinity of Chicago. But I did find a chain of lakes, north of Chicago, and I just went up and started fishing these lakes with some of my friends. I found that the lakes were quite full of fish, but the lakes as a whole had a pretty bad reputation.

QUESTION: *You mean local people were having trouble catching fish?*

PERRY: They were having lots of trou-

ble. They said fishing had gone bad due to pollution and also due to the number of carp in the lakes, and boating, even back that far. They could catch some fish during spawning, but they said the lakes "were gone." In other words, the old saying "fished out," which wasn't true. You might say the fishing was *fabulous*, and I could see quickly why a lot of fishermen who were fishing the old ways were not locating the fish due to the terrain, due to the water and weather conditions. These fish weren't readily available to every fisherman.

So to make a long story short, we really shook them up, and the people were very receptive. I was fortunate, at that time, that a large Chicago newspaper had a young writer (Tom McNally of the *Chicago Tribune*) who hadn't lived in the area too long. He had recently moved to the Chicago area and was receptive to going fishing with me, and so he did. He was impressed with our catch and so he wrote a story. It impressed the local fishermen very much, to the point that I had to take his boss fishing to see if what Tom had written was true. I never will forget that trip. In one school of bass in Lake Marie, we got 42 big bass one afternoon, just as fast as we could cast. Fortunately I had seven fishermen along, and they fished with us so that we could make a pretty

nice catch of fish. That opened the gates and then it was just a question of training and teaching other fishermen and giving talks.

QUESTION: *These fish that you caught at that time, they were rather old fish, weren't they?*

PERRY: Yes, I'd say they were the last age group in the lake. Most all of them that you could catch were above 4 lbs. A lot of 3-pounders, too. But they were the last age group. There were very, very few young fish coming along. After a lot of these fish were harvested, the fishing could have gotten pretty bad. Fortunately, there were a lot of good northern pike coming along at that time.

QUESTION: *Let's continue talking about the early days for awhile. I know there were times when you were actually subjected to ridicule by a lot of disbelievers. Do any cases come to mind where you almost walked into a "loaded setup" so to speak?*

PERRY: (Much laughter.) Many times. I recall one incident back in the early '50s. I was fishing on Clark Hill Reservoir down toward the dam, down towards Augusta, pretty close to the lower end of the reservoir.

QUESTION: *What state was that?*

PERRY: That's on the Georgia/South

continued

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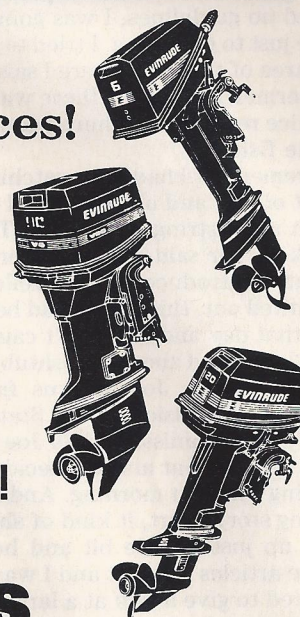
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Carolina border and the lake is called Clark Hill Reservoir. It's quite a large reservoir on the Savannah River. I had just gone in there kind of quiet because I had no guidelines, I was going to the lake just to go fishing. I tried to pick out an area of the lake where I saw a lot of fishermen and where there was a pretty nice resort area where I could catch some fish.

I remember I had been catching quite a lot of fish and one evening I came in with a big stringer of them. The boat dock owner said, "Come over here. I want to introduce you to a fellow." As it turned out, this fellow had been fishing that day and he hadn't caught any fish, and I had about a washtub full. He said, "This is Joe Stearns from the Education Division of the State Game and Fish Commission." So Joe Stearns and I had a chat and we decided to go fishing the next morning. And to make a long story short, it kind of shook the guy up just a little bit and he wrote some articles about it and I was finally invited to give a talk at a large department store in the area.

So I gave a talk and they asked me if I was going to do any more fishing in the area. I said I was going to go back up to the upper end of the lake on my way home. That's about all I said. On my way home there was an area way up on Clark Hill I had never seen before. I went into a fishing camp and when I got there, there were about 100 people there. Some of them were outdoor writers. The word had gotten out. So just as in the past, they were there to say "show me," or "your ideas are a bunch of malarky." So there wasn't anything I could do but just go fishing.

I asked a guy if there were any areas where they had seen any fish or caught any fish. He pointed upstream and said, "Yes, last week a fellow caught some up there." I asked him if he minded showing me the area where he had seen some fish caught. He said, "Fine!"

So he got in one boat and I in another boat with a fellow from my own home town. I told the guy we would follow him but not to go too fast because I wanted to look the territory over. I wanted to look at the terrain. I wanted to look at the other features around there. I don't know how many boats followed us, but it seemed like they were stretched out a mile behind us, following to see what I would do.

Well, we had proceeded up the lake about a mile. I was looking on both sides, and I told this fellow who was leading us that I gotta be in an area where there were some fish caught in the past. He went around a bend, but I looked over to the other side of the lake to the west. I saw some terrain that gave me a pretty good idea of what

should be there below water. So I told the fellow in the boat with me, we better go over and look at that.

As I approached the area I threw out a big deep running lure and let out a lot of line and was just going to troll the area to feel the bottom (there was no such thing as a depth sounder or anything to look at). You just had to look at the terrain and then use your lures to map the bottom and see what was down there. My lure hit just about what I expected it to hit. I was working the bottom and said to the fellow with me, "Boy, this looks good. If I could just hit a drop-off, there should be a fish here." At about that time I felt my lure hit the break, and I had a good fish on.

Well, the other boats had swung in, but they stayed out of the way pretty well. I dropped anchor, but this other man who was leading us had gone around the curve and didn't see me catch the fish. Those that saw what happened next reported it was 30 consecutive casts that produced bass, but actually it was 33, before missing a fish. Well, after my 33rd bass, the fish were

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gone, but I put them in the bottom of the boat just as fast as I could haul them in. I was anchored pretty far out on the lake. They had never seen anything like this before. The man who had been leading us came back after awhile and he said, "Well, what happened?" Then he looked in the bottom of the boat. I didn't have time to string any of those fish up and there were 30 big bass flopping around in the bottom of the boat. He got pretty excited.

But to get back to your question about ridicule and skepticism, when we got back to the boat dock there were many people standing there. One of the guys who saw it happen said, "I saw it with my own eyes, but I still don't believe it." So the "I don't believe it" skepticism was very great in those days.

I might say just a little bit more about the non-believers, skeptics, and things of this nature. Anytime that I would take a person, such as a writer, out on the water, then the other guys (writers) felt neglected and many, many times there would be a comment in the newspaper or from a group of people that this was a lot of "hawgwash." Now I don't know if this was professional jealousy or what, but I ran into a lot of laughter when I would talk about the movements of fish and fishing facts, and it still goes on a lot even today. But

we're a long way from where we were 40 years ago.

I remember one time I was in Texas and I was having quite a problem with skepticism and couldn't get anybody to listen. I'd catch lots of fish, but still couldn't get the people to listen. I was even having a great problem convincing local fishermen that, due to the hot Texas weather, they had to increase their (lure) speed. They had never heard of this.

I remember one time I was having a very tough time in this one particular area. I couldn't get *anybody* to listen. So I just went fishing. But before I went fishing, I inquired around as to where the local "experts" were; the guys that were big wheels in fishing in that area. I found one lake where they usually hung out, so to speak. The owner of the dock was quite an "expert." So I went out and rented a boat. Well, this particular place in Texas had liberal laws on possession limits. And it was full of fishermen. So I just rented a boat.

The fishing camp was a partial float-type dock, and it had big windows where you could look out over the lake. So I went out and I knew they were watching. I put on quite a show of speed control and boat maneuvering, and mapping (while trolling). It wasn't exactly excessive speed, but it was something they had never seen before. Actually, if I would have slowed down I probably wouldn't have drawn any attention. But I did the mapping and when I came back in . . . I didn't stay out so terribly long, my boat bumped up against the boat dock. This guy came out and some of his cronies were following. He said, "Mister, are you a stranger around here?"

I said, "Yep!"

He said, "Have you ever fished this lake before?"

I said, "Nope!"

He said, "Well, friend, you've been fishing way too fast."

I said, "Is that right? You mean I've been doing this thing all wrong? Maybe I better start all over again." With that, I reached over the side of the boat, picked up the 15 bass that I had, and released them all back into the lake. They'll never forget "speed control" around that area.

I could sit here all week and talk about running into skepticism, and doubting Thomases', and so on. But I know after I came farther north, I think it was in '58 or '59, things began to change a little. I got up as far as Minnesota and was having a little problem making contact with the fishermen. I inquired around as to the best lake and where the so-called local "experts" hung out. This time I was very lucky.

I found the best guide and the best (supposed to be) local expert. Also, he owned the resort. So I rented a boat. I

wanted to find out how the fishermen in that area were fishing, and so I looked the situation over. I went out and did my mapping of the lake.

Apparently his way of fishing, as a guide, was to take fishermen out and fish with live frogs with long cane poles and anchored up next to the weed beds. I followed him for a couple days, but in the process, I was mapping all the areas where he fished. His so-called hot-spots. Well, about the fourth day I was about ready to go fishing. He left early with two fishermen, and it just so happened that he went to an area where I expected him to go because everytime he went out, this was the first place he headed for. I knew this area from A to Z. They weren't even *close* to the best productive spot. The weedline would get *some* fish where he was, but they weren't on the best productive structure, which was about 100 yards off. So when he got his frogs out and was sitting there, I moved into the area.

I was quite far out into the lake and started doing my maneuvering trolling until I got their attention. After I saw that I had their attention with fast turns and everything, I dropped back a long length of line and I knew *exactly* the path to take to hit this structure just right. I had already established my shoreline sightings. When my lure came up on the structure a big fish took it. I stopped the boat, and stood up in the

boat. I held my rod high and started yelling. Every time I got the big bass up on top of the water and every time he jumped, I gave out a great big rebel yell. I would glance over my shoulder and see three sets of eyes glued on every maneuver I made.

Well, I finally got the fish into the boat and held him up to look at him. I was kind of talking to myself, I reckon. I then held the big bass up again, looked at him, and just tossed him back over my shoulder towards the shallows. You


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never heard so much yaking (coming out of that other boat) in all your life. The chatter that was going on in that other boat was really something to hear. So then I anchored the boat.

I was familiar with the structure, so it wasn't a problem as to where to anchor the boat. On my first cast I made a long cast and let the lure sink to the bottom. Then I bumped and cranked the lure over the end of the bar and there was another big one on. I held the rod high and went through the same

performance. Every time the fish would jump, I would let out a great big rebel yell. And then, after the fish was landed, I would look the fish over and throw it over my shoulder into shallow water. I didn't want to spook the other fish out there on the structure.

Well, after catching about eleven or so, I did the same thing with every fish. I don't recall the exact number of fish, it was well beyond the legal limit, but I was throwing them back as fast as I was catching 'em. Well, these three men had their eyeballs on this operation. Then after spooking the fish off, I pulled up my anchor and headed on in toward the dock. Well, this is one performance that worked. Those guys passed me up on the way in. They were waiting at the dock when I got there, and there wasn't a one of them that said, "I saw it, but I don't believe it." They were ready to ask HOW I did it. So there was a difference between the personalities there and what I ran into many years ago in the South.

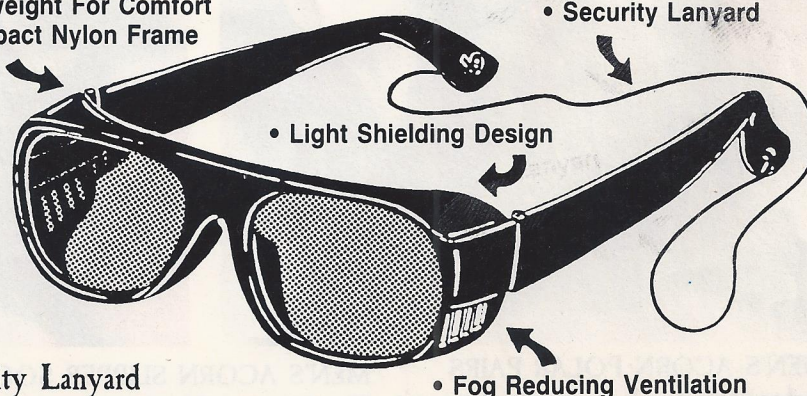
But there is *still* a lot of skepticism. I have had to fish just about every fishing hole in the North, the East and in the West. Everybody wanted to say, "Well, it may work there, but it won't work here on *my* waters." In other words, "Show me! Then maybe I'll believe." 

To be continued . . .

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