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Grassbed Fishing

By

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It is always with pleasure that on occasion I devote my column space to others for their research and writing. Such is the case this week with the following story:

Readers who vacationed at the Lake Ontario shore years ago may remember hearing of those who "had gone out fishin' on the Grassbeds." Do you also recollect seeing, late in the afternoon, a rowboat coming back to shore and in the evening having a supper of pan fried yellow perch or small-mouth bass?

In certain areas, some distance out from shore, were found Grassbeds. Grassbeds were on shoals, not exceeding six fathoms (about 36 feet) in depth. These shoals existed near or directly off-shore some; one being north-west of Johnson Creek and another being out from the small tributary now the site of Green Harbor Marina. There has been some opinions these beds may have been the same as they shifted from year to year.

Grassbeds were either simple or tricky to locate. They could be only a half-mile from the beach or further out; depending on the season or lake conditions. A fisherman might look into the water and see what looked to be an underwater meadow, with waving weeds almost floating on the surface, or

may have had to run drag lines until they attached to these long grasses.

Equipment needed to fish the Grassbeds was a good long rowboat (hopefully one with a well-cured bottom -- boats were all wood in those days -- so few leaks would occur), a few good bamboo poles, a small bucket of minnows or soft shell crabs for bait, and another larger bucket for your fish. People with no skills in swimming or a fear of distance from shore never went Grassbed fishing. In the early days all fishermen rowed to the Grassbeds but in later years some may have had 3 or 5 horsepower outboard motors. In and since 1926 New York State required fishing licenses.

Fishing was done on clear, calm days and fishermen always checked the skies for possible changes in weather conditions. In the days of Grassbed fishing there were no such devices as electronic depth finders, compasses that will bring you right back to the point where you enter the lake, and fish scanners.

On especially clear days the water was also clear enough to look down into the Grassbeds and see the fish swimming through the weeds.

Summer folk fished the Grassbeds from before 1900 until nearly 1960. In a 1981 Orleans County Historical Association Oral History interview conducted with the late Curtis P. Conners of Lyndonville, he mentioned: "Oh we fished there for years. Then one time there was a big storm and after that all the Grassbeds disappeared and they never have come back to my knowledge."

In the spring of 1985 a study on the demise of the Grassbeds was done by members of the Biology Department at SUNY Brockport. Researchers interviewed shore-line

residents, fishermen, and local historians. No scientific conclusions were found but most were of the opinion this decline of Grassbed fishing was caused by the construction of sewage treatment facilities, changes in phosphate levels, or powerful lake storms.



The circa 1885 photo here shows a man in a rowboat on Johnson's Creek by Lakeside Bluff.