

Ice Fishing: It's An Art And A Cult

By TIM RICHARD
Sunday Editor

With all the padding they wear, and with the number of outfits that are red, they look like plodding Santa Clauses or perhaps firemen on a space capsule.

The give-away is a small, home-made sled or a bucket, out of which protrudes a midget-sized fishing pole. The men gather in small clusters on the frozen lakes, and the wind, scarcely noticeable on land, picks up speed and bite as it slashes after them.

They're dedicated, these ice fishermen, because this is what they call "first ice," and now is when the fishing is best.

KENT LAKE, the meandering artificial impoundment of the Huron River on I-96, is a favorite spot. Access is easy on the clear roads. The variety of species is great. The setting is natural.

One popular spot seems to be off Hickory Ridge on the southwest part of the lake. Bluegills and perch are the chief fare.

The zealots head for the open spaces, however, and fish the deep water for the crappie—that speckled, slightly larger cousin of the gill who likes minnows (pronounced "minnies" by the pros). "You gotta be nuts to go out there in that wind," says one Hickory Ridge gill fisherman of the men seeking crappies on the wind-swept lake.

Look who's talking! Aren't ALL ice fishermen crazy? Can anyone be considered sane who tramps out onto a lake in zero weather and sits for hours over a tiny hole in the ice, often catching nothing?

Well, look at it this way. The guys who know the ropes usually catch as many as, or more than, they do in summer. The air is wonderfully clean — darn cold, but clean. There are no shop machines or office telephones going off in your ears. No one's yipping, at you.

It's a more solitary kind of fishing than in summer. Even with companions around, one doesn't talk much. It's escapism, of a sort.

The ice fisherman contends that because the water is colder, the fish taste better in winter. That's true — but it's a rationalization. It isn't for mere laymen to try to probe the mind of the ice fisherman. Ice fishing has its own internal mystic; it's more of a cult, like yoga, than a mundane sport.

ICE FISHING IS as much like summer fishing as threading a needle with boxing gloves is like swinging an ax.

Ice fishing is a delicate activity. The pole is only a couple of feet long. The line is thin. The hooks are a fraction of the size of the standard hook. In summer you use a gob of worms; in winter, a tiny corn borer or mouse or waxworm, less than a half-inch long.

In summer, a hungry gill takes a voracious cut at the bait. In winter, he taps it, and you have to keep jiggling the bait at all times and watching the tiny bobber constantly to detect a nibble. It takes a fine eye and light touch to catch a fish through the ice.

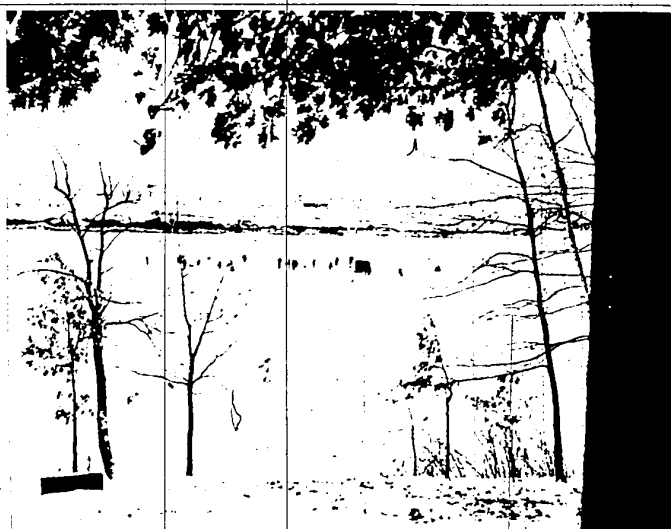
If the basic equipment is cheap, the other equipment — mainly, clothing — isn't. More varieties of equipment are on view on the western side of the state, where the ice fishing season lasts longer and the technique more refined, but there's plenty to spend money on around here.

Developed by the military, Korean boots, which are about the size of a deep-sea diver's shoes, are becoming standard fare. Hand-warming and seat-warming gadgets are gaining popularity.

The real scientists at this ice fishing game start before daylight and have gas lanterns in a box with runners. The lantern provides pre-dawn light and throws heat when you sit on the box.

ONE OF THE NICER things about ice fishing is that you don't have a lot of 12-year-old kids with 35-horsepower outboards slicing up the lake.

That advantage, however, may be disappearing. These little one- and two-man snow tractors, called sno-mobiles, are catching on and becoming more common on lakes. They sound like chain saws or machine guns. But perhaps that's the way it has to be in the world's auto capital. A lot of guys get nervous when they're not around the roar of an internal combustion engine and the smell of gasoline.



A COLONY OF fishermen was on the ice of Kent Lake off Hickory Ridge despite the 9-degree chill of New Year's morning.

Golden Lesson

Locking your car in suburban shopping centers at this time of the year is a necessary precaution.

Anyone who doesn't think so might remember the story of W.D. Fenner, who learned the lesson under somewhat different circumstances.

Fenner, who is a 75-year-old miner from Grants Pass,

Ore., told police in Sacramento, Calif., that he lost \$6,000 in gold nuggets. He said the gold was taken from his unlocked car while he was inside a cocktail lounge.

Police asked him why he didn't lock the car.

They said he answered: "We don't have to lock our cars where I come from."

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