



Standing on the rock below the Rt. 1 Bridge on Rappahannock

# A Silver Spring

Story and Photos  
by  
Jack Randolph

Everybody liked Jimmy O'Donnell. He was a sprightly little guy who walked with a limp, which was a reminder of a childhood bout with polio. But like many youngsters who had to overcome an adversity of some sort, Jimmy excelled in his trade. He became a master potter, a designer of pottery whose services were sought throughout the industry. It was after a lifetime of achievement that Jimmy and his wife retired to their rural home on the banks of Wards Creek in Prince George County. There Jimmy set up a kiln and dabbled in the making of pottery, which he sold in his shop on Route 10, well known as Prince George China.

On the wall of his shop Jimmy had a huge collection of calling cards from customers all over the United States and many other countries. On a weekend you could count on seeing several cars with out-of-state license plates parked in front of the store. In the spring Jimmy would invite some of his favored customers to walk over to the banks of Wards Creek to see what Jimmy said were rainbow trout. He took great delight in "his" fish, and except among friends who knew better, I don't believe he ever owned up to the fact that they weren't trout. Jimmy has been gone for about thirty years now, but those of us who knew him cherish his memory.

Of course, Jimmy's "trout" were not trout at all. They were river herring, either blueback herring or alewives, which at one time came up the creek by the countless thousands. The runs are not as strong anymore, but each spring a few herring continue to arrive and spawn to remind us of what the run once was.

Before we get too far into this story, let's set the cast of characters. We will be discussing Virginia's two shads, the American or white shad and the hickory shad. We will also look at the river herring, of which there are essentially two, the alewife and the blueback herring. It is the alewife that causes some confusion.

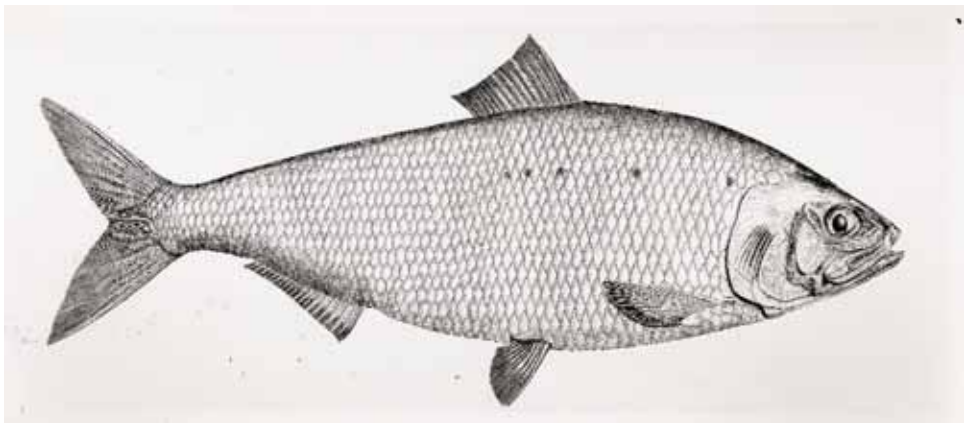
Just as some folks mistakenly insist upon calling pickerel "pike," there are anglers who insist upon calling the gizzard shad "alewife." The gizzard shad has a small mouth that is designed for sucking up mud from which the fish extracts its nourishment. The stomach feels hard to the touch, sort of like a chicken's gizzard, hence the name gizzard shad. It is a year-around resident of our rivers. The alewife, on the other hand, is a true herring. In fact, it is very difficult to distinguish the true alewife from the blueback herring just by looking at them. However if you clean them, look carefully at the lining of the stomach. If this lining is flesh-colored, you have an alewife. If the lining is black, the fish is a blueback herring. The bluebacks and alewives come to our rivers to spawn, but they ultimately return to the ocean. Fish that live in saltwater and spawn in freshwater are called anadromous fish.

Moving on, we have one more call to make. We must distinguish the hickory shad from the American shad, which is often called the white shad here in Virginia. In this case knowing the difference between the shads is more than academic. The taking of white shad in the Chesapeake Bay and the rivers that flow



Angler with shad on Rappahannock

American Shad



into it is prohibited. The exception is that American shad caught from the Nottoway and Meherrin rivers may be kept because neither of these rivers flows into the Chesapeake Bay. There is no closed season on hickory shad.

The taking of the American shad is controlled by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, a federal entity. It became necessary to halt the American shad fishery when overfishing threatened to wipe out the Atlantic population. The river herring are facing a similar fate, but unfortunately little has been done to pro-

tect this species. They, too, may be over harvested, and there is some evidence that development upon the tidal creeks is depriving the herring of needed spawning grounds. There is also speculation that a contributing factor may be an increasing beaver population that is blocking the upstream mobility of spawning river herring. Catching herring in dip nets was once a very popular activity in Tidewater Virginia, but this local tradition is also falling off on many streams.

To distinguish between the two shads, the easiest way is to look at the



Fishing for herring on Swift Creek, Colonial Heights

mouth. On the hickory shad the upper jaw fits *inside the lower jaw*. The lower jaw of the American shad fits *inside the upper jaw*.

Usually the first word of the annual appearance of shad comes from Bobby Colston who operates the Tackle Box in Gaston, North Carolina. He generally gives me the heads up when the first shad are caught from the Roanoke River at Weldon, North Carolina. This run usually starts in late February, and to me it is the

signal that the spring excitement is about to begin in Virginia. These are, after all, annual spawning runs, as these are also anadromous fish that return to freshwater to spawn.

We are usually well into March when the first shad appear in the Nottoway and Meherrin Rivers. Before the spring gobbler season opens we begin to see shad in the James and Appomattox Rivers. Herring move up the Chickahominy and gang up at Walkers Dam. Almost simulta-

neously, the shad appear in the Pamunkey and Mattaponi Rivers before they show up in the Rappahannock. Finally, they forge up the Potomac to the vicinity of Fletchers Boat House, which is the epicenter of shad fishing in our nation's capital. Check the Fletcher Boat House website to keep tabs on this fishery.

Of course, what goes up must come down. The Roanoke River run, the first to start, is the first to end, and so it continues up to the Potomac.

The Delaware River now has an excellent shad run, well celebrated by Pennsylvania and New Jersey. For years there were no shad runs in this river because of a severe pollution block in the Philadelphia area. When the area was finally cleaned up, the fish surged up the river. I read a book recently whose author claimed he had to fight a four pound Delaware River shad four hours to land it. He was using ultralight tackle. Those Yankee shad must be made of sterner stuff. I have yet to encounter a shad with that much steam.

I must admit that my favorite shad fishing spot is the Rappahannock River right in the city limits of Fredericksburg - mainly the waters a hundred yards or so to either side of US-1. We may see the shad action move upriver shortly. Last year the Embury Dam on the Rappahannock above Fredericksburg was breached, giving the spawning shad access to many more miles of river. Hopefully in years to come, the hook and line shad fishery will be extended far upstream. The same is true of the James River where a fishway built into Boshers Dam in Richmond gives shad access to many more miles of river. Curiously, it appears that only American shad are availing themselves of the fishway at Boshers Dam. The hickories apparently are content to spawn farther downstream.



Shad angler on the Appomattox River in Petersburg

One thing I have learned about fishing - any kind of fishing - is there really are no rules. If you start building a set, you'll soon discover that all the rules will accomplish is cost you fishing opportunities. This is as true with shad as with anything else.

Most often shad bite best very early in the morning or very late in the afternoon. They also bite well on the change of the tide, especially the first hour of the outgoing. However I have caught shad all day long, and about the only time I didn't catch them was when I didn't have a line in the water.

I used to parlay my shad fishing with spring gobbler hunting. One spring, when I was in the army and stationed in Washington, I took a short leave. I would

hunt turkeys at Fort A.P. Hill early and then drive to Fredericksburg to fish for shad.

It was late in the shad season. The hickories had thinned out greatly, and the locals had lost interest. I had the river to myself as I stood on a rock and tossed a pair of shad darts into the fast-moving water. I usually fish two darts; one is tied to the end of the line, and the other is tied to the line on a short dropper about a foot above. As rule I cast slightly upstream and across, allowing the darts to swing down on a tight line. When the darts complete their drift, they rise and swing in the current. Many strikes come at that moment. That morning I couldn't buy a strike at any moment.

Demonstrating fishing acumen

generally alien to me, I decided to try heavier darts to get down deeper. I had some heavy orange ones in my kit, and I tied two on. The very first cast drew a strike, and something surged downstream, catching me by surprise and breaking my four-pound test line.

Changing spools on my spinning reel, I installed some six-pound test line and tried a few more of those orange darts. Another cast and another strike, but this time my gear held and eventually, about ten minutes later, I netted a four pound white shad. This took place in the mid-Sixties, long before the season was closed on white shad.

If you are not familiar with darts, they are very much like miniature buck-tails, weighing from 1/64 to 1/4 ounce. I

liked to use darts that weigh from 1/32 to 1/8 ounce. They come in many colors. A favorite at Fredericksburg has a black and green body and a white tail. Red and white or chartreuse and red are favored colors in most shad rivers. Molds for making your own darts are available. When I tie my own, I prefer to use calf tail instead of bucktail. The best colors are white, yellow, chartreuse, orange and pink. I prefer to fish them on ultralight tackle with four-pound test line, going to six-pound test when needed. Many anglers use small silver and brass colored spoons for shad. Spoons with fixed single hooks appear to be more lethal than those with free swinging hooks.

Fly fishing for shad and herring is gaining popularity. Any fly outfit ranging from 6 weight to 8 weight is suitable. The flies are generally weighed and follow the same color patterns as shad darts.

An interesting aspect of shad fishing is that the shad don't feed during their spawning run. No one is quite sure why they strike the lures offered them. They are primarily plankton feeders, which deepens the mystery as to why they attack artificial lures. Hickory shad are known to eat smaller fish.

From North Carolina south, the American shad spawns only once and dies. Shad spawning in northern rivers spawn several times before dying. A curious thing about shad is that, unlike salmon, they have no fidelity to their spawning streams. They may show up in one river one year and in a river hundreds of miles away the next. This begs the question concerning northern and southern shad. If the northern shad spawns in a southern river, does it die? Generally shad spawn in coastal rivers from the St. Johns in Florida to the Bay of Fundy. American shad have also been successfully introduced on the West Coast.

In Virginia, look for shad in the Meherrin River in Emporia. The Nottoway is accessible from the several boat ramps on the river above Cortland. The James River offers good shad fishing from boats in the vicinity of the I-95 Bridge. Ancarrow's Landing on the south side of the James near I-95 offers access to the river. Be sure your vehicle is securely locked if you use this ramp. You may also put in at Dutch Gap or Deep Bottom and run up to the I-95 area.

In Petersburg and Colonial Heights, there is good shad fishing in the Appomattox River in the vicinity of the Powerhouse. On the Chickahominy, many people fish for herring from Walkers Dam in Lanexa. Some use plain gold hits, which the herring hit with gusto. The Sabiki Rig, which is a rig consisting of a half dozen tiny flies, is also popular. There are very few shad caught on hook and line in the Chickahominy.

On the Mattaponi, anglers put in at Aylett on Route 360. The Rappahannock River offers its best shad action from a hundred yards below the US 1 Bridge upstream. On the Potomac, you can rent boats and obtain tackle as well as good advice at Fletchers Boat House in Washington, D.C.

#### Tight Lines!

An outdoor writer since 1948, Jack Randolph is a retired Assistant Director of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. His work has appeared in major national publications, such as *Sports Afield* and *Outdoor Life* and in such newspapers as *The Baltimore Sunday Sun*, *Richmond News Leader*. He was the outdoor columnist for *The Stars & Stripes Pacific* and *The Army, Airforce, and Navy Times*. He is a frequent contributor to *Virginia Wildlife* and other publications.



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