



**G**listening broad backs break water's surface as large tarpon cruise the channel edges of Key West Harbor, gulping air into prehistoric air bladders. Outsized silver kings hover under docks and piers in nearby Key West Bight, visible to throngs flocking to waterfront restaurants and bars. They always turn heads.

My brother and I once filleted our catch on my boat tied up in "The Bight,"

dropping scraps into the clear harbor water. The scraps did not sink far before a large silver flash materialized, and our discards abruptly vanished. Key West harbor tarpon come with voracious appetites. They can put on quite a show while you clean your catch. They can put on quite a show at the end of your line, as well.

Key West is tarpon country. Fly anglers converge on the southernmost city

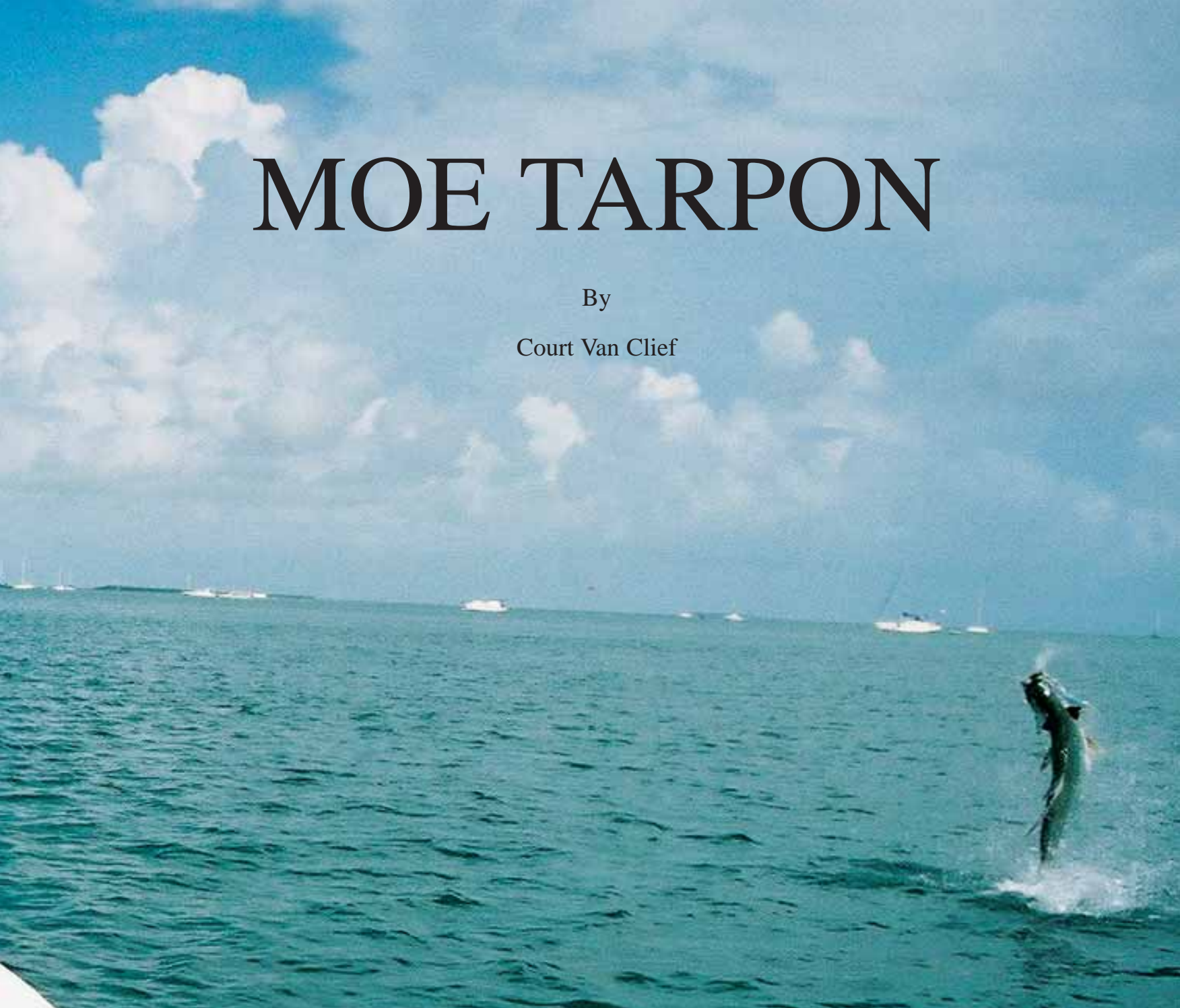
during the spring months, in quest of a hard-fought battle with this great fish on eight or nine weight fly tackle. But tarpon are not exclusively available to those casting the long rod. Conch Republic tarpon stomping grounds include Key West Harbor where they enter from the Gulf of Mexico through Calda or Northwest Channels or from the Atlantic on the south end of the harbor.

Key West Harbor tarpon fishing

# MOE TARPON

By

Court Van Clief



takes place within minutes of the dock. Your backdrop is the Key West waterfront, dotted with marinas, hotels, restaurants and bars. It is not unusual to be locked in combat with a leaping silver king as a 300 foot cruise ship eases into port alongside you, intending to unload its cargo of tourists to assault the island city's shops and restaurants for a day.

On a recent trip to the Conch Republic, a powerful urge to grapple with

a Key West Harbor tarpon pulled me to the waterfront where I connected with Capt. Moe. The camaraderie of the tarpon fleet is contagious. And the aura of fighting a big tarpon in the very spot Papa Hemingway did some 70 years gone by, while living on the island and writing some of his finest works, is alluring. Fighting a gill-rattling, jumping, sliver-sided tarpon surrounded by the scenes of Key West's busy harbor, within minutes of a grilled dolphin sandwich and a cold beer

lunch ashore, is a bonus.

Capt. Moe slips *Reel Lucky* into gear and eases her away from the dock, hanging a sharp left to avoid a collision with the Half Shell Raw Bar. The tarpon are waiting within a few minutes of the dock.

Key West Harbor tarpon fishing goes beyond simply anchoring in the harbor, tossing a bait overboard, and awaiting



a strike. The bottom of the harbor is undulating. A series of ledges and dips, carved out by ever-pressing, ageless tides, form the underwater topography. Like most fish, tarpon feel comfortable hanging around structure. It takes knowledge of the harbor floor to know where to drop anchor and how to use current to the anglers' advantage. Line must be released from the reel in a manner that allows the bait to drift naturally in the tide. If drag from the line is evident, the tarpon will look elsewhere for their meal. They can detect subtle signs of unnatural presentation.

At anchor on a slick calm Key West morning, Moe and I ride the harbor's swift current. Aroma of eggs and bacon, sizzling on the griddle of a waterfront eatery, wafts across the harbor on the morning's gentle breeze. A parade of offshore battle wagons rumbles past making their way to the blue water, only seven miles to the south. Flats skiffs skim across the water's surface, heading to the backcountry. Guides grasp steering wheels; anglers sit intently at their sides,

anticipating the first cast on clear, shallow water. Fast catamaran ferries from Fort Myers and Naples approach in Northwest Channel as a flock of skimmers wing by on the deck, looking for a morsel to satisfy a tropical morning appetite. A grand osprey rides the breeze overhead, enjoying his winter residence, far from the February chill of the Chesapeake Bay.

Capt. Moe knows these waters well. I am delighted to accompany him to this special place. Halfway through a brilliant clear morning, my bait stops drifting in the middle of a drop back. There is no feeling of a strike, but the bait stops drifting through the tide. Moe notices this. With a hint of urgency in his voice, he affirms, "That's him!! Lock up and hit him!" Recognizing the armor-plated interior of its mouth, I follow Moe's instructions and let him have it. Twice. Hard! Short jabs, as I was taught by The Native Conch during the early stages of my tarpon fishing education. In a matter of seconds line comes taught, and all hell breaks loose! Water parts with fury as a large glistening silver body erupts from the harbor's

green water, gills rattling in an angry clatter. Gravity hauls the great tarpon back down, and he re-enters his domain with an explosion of frothy white foam. Once he's rejoined with his element, line begins dumping from my reel at an alarming rate, as a great fish rushes for freedom. Capt. Moe quickly drops his mooring buoy over the side, and we are free to pursue my adversary before he robs me of all my line. He continues his highball freight train run as we leave Fort Zachary Taylor to port and pursue to the south. He is headed towards the open Atlantic.

A series of eye-popping leaps seems to tire him. I am able to pump and wind, packing precious line back on the spool. Until the next outward-bound run erupts, and we go through the same drill all over again. As the fish surges away, I can swear Moe is chuckling while I struggle to turn this wonderful beast back to the boat. Guides have a way of doing that. I think it provides a good-natured show of comic relief and a respect for the power of these prized fish. Guides learn their trade with tackle in their hands. They appreci-

ate what their anglers are going through during the heat of battle with a big fish.

Nearing the end of a thirty minute fight, the fish shows maybe ten feet beneath the boat. With two strokes of his great tail, he lunges out of sight into the depths again. But he is tired now. I am able to pump him to our boat side and his release. Capt. Moe slips a gloved hand over the bottom jaw of a six foot tarpon and disengages the hook. As Moe swims the recovering tarpon at boatside, renewing oxygen to his bloodstream, I stand, arms shaking from the intensity of the fight, admiring this incredible creature. Power begins to surge through a reviving silver body, and the tarpon shuts his massive mouth over Moe's clutching hands, signaling the time has come to return to his freedom along the underwater ledges of Key West Harbor.

On the short ride back to Land's End Marina, I bask in the warm glow delivered by the connecting to one of nature's magnificent specimens and the camaraderie of sharing the moment with one who appreciates it. To me that is the essence of fishing. The exposure to nature in all her glory and the bonds and relationships formed with others who understand.

At the north end of Margaret Street in "old town" Key West, you'll find the Half Shell Raw Bar and Turtle Kraals Restaurant. Nestled between the two is Land's End Marina. The first four boats on your right, as you enter the dock, comprise The Lucky Fleet, operated by a great group of salts, well versed in all aspects of Key West fishing. The first boat on your right is the *Reel Lucky*, a sleek center console outfit skippered by Capt. Moe.

Moe can put you on the fish offshore, along the reef, or in the back country. When the Key West tarpon are downtown, there is a good chance you will find him riding the hook in the harbor, awaiting the

strike of a brawny harbor tarpon. Most likely the wait will not be long.

Call Capt. Moe to find out when the Key West tarpon are downtown. Catch him at (305) 304-8065, or drop him an email at [luckyfishingkw.com](mailto:luckyfishingkw.com).

When you go, give Capt. Moe my regards. I know you'll "catch 'em up."

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Court Van Clief is a staff writer. He resides in Albemarle County and has a second home in Mathews, Virginia.

Capt. Moe and *Reel Lucky*



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