

MY TRIP TO ANGUISH CREEK

It began as just another fishing trip. I was up hours before the dawn and within minutes zooming down the back roads of Colorado for some challenging fishing. After an hour, I pulled into an old cafe for some hot coffee. The gas pumps in front of the place were covered with rust and surrounded by weeds. I guessed they hadn't been operable for forty years.

The place was nearly empty. A few locals read the paper, and some farmers bitched about the "fedral govmint" while waiting for the post office to open so they could collect their crop subsidy payments. A waitress with neon pink fingernails approached me. "What'll ya have?" she asked.

"Just coffee."

"How do you like it?"

"Hot," I said. She returned in a minute with some piping hot coffee in a white ceramic mug. As I sipped my java, I scanned my crumpled map and said, "Hmmm, I wonder which one of these lakes has got the big fish."

I guess I spoke too loud because this old-timer sauntered over to me and said, "If you're looking for a good place to fish, Coon Lake's the spot. Why a man could pull fish out of there as big as a football all day long!"

"Don't listen to Earl," warned another old codger, "the best spot 'round here is Dawson's Bend. There's bass in there to beat the band. I mean big ole bass!"

"Gee fellas," I said, "I'm not looking for some mamby pamby place where just anybody can drop a line and catch monster fish. I'm looking for a challenge."

"You mean you don't get a charge out of showing all your friends the string of whoppers you catch when you go fishing?"

"No," I said, "I don't let my ego get involved. I don't care if I catch fish or not -- as long as it's challenging."

"Well," said Earl as he scratched his chin, "if it's a challenge you want, why not try Anguish Creek?"

"I didn't see any Anguish Creek on the map," I said.

"That's 'cuz ain't nobody fished it in years," said the second old-timer. "Why it's just hell to fish. It's filled with every form of snag know to mankind. I once heard tell of a fella who hooked a weed and pulled so hard he sunk his whole boat and drowned!"

"Yeah, and they got fish in there so worldly they'll nibble your hook clean to the metal and leave you faster than a Kansas City hooker. There's one old channel cat in there so big and fat and ornery they call him the Incredible Hulk."

"Gee," I said, "Anguish Creek sounds like my kind of place." After getting directions from Earl, I eventually found the road to Anguish Creek, otherwise known as County Road 117-H, but it became impassable about a half-mile from the water. At this point the "road" was nothing more than two barely noticeable tracks in the mud, but the real problem was a tree trunk -- about four feet in diameter -- which had evidently been struck by lightning and now blocked my path.

A tree trunk would not deter me. I got my gear together and hoisted my aluminum rowboat down off of the jeep. Sure, it weighed eighty pounds, but that didn't seem like too much to carry on my back in return for a fun-filled day of challenging fishing.

I trudged through mud, weeds, and mosquitos for a good hour before I finally saw

Anguish Creek. I whistled to take my mind off the pain. Mostly I whistled my wife's favorite song -- Keep Your Hands To Yourself by the Georgia Satellites, but that's neither here nor there.

Before I decided what to use as bait, I opened a can of beer. It was only 7:00 a.m., but if you're going to do macho things like fish Anguish Creek, you really should drink beer. Besides, today's beers are less filling and taste great.

When I finished my beer, it was time to bait my hook and get down to business. I tried worms, salmon eggs, cheese balls, chicken livers, and all sorts of things. I jigged and trolled and popped and spun until I was blue in the face, but I didn't get so much as a nibble. I was so tired I treated myself to another beer.

By noon I was getting discouraged and the weather was getting worse. Ominous storm clouds gathered. The wind blew at nearly gale force, tossing my little boat to and fro like a piece of welfare legislation. One of my beer cans fell into the lake. Being an environmentalist, I didn't want to leave it there -- someone else might make it to Anguish Creek in the next decade and I didn't want my beer can to spoil it for them. I figured I could put a treble-hook on my line, snag the can, and reel it in like a true sportsman.

I casted perfectly, but just as I snagged the can the biggest fish I've ever seen erupted out of the water, devoured the beer can, and dove for the bottom like a Trident submarine. I knew right away I had the monster fish known as the Incredible Hulk.

That fish pulled me and my little boat for hours. It was all I could do to hang on. Every bone in my body screamed in agony. But I sure wanted to catch the Incredible Hulk. Not because I wanted to brag about catching a two hundred pound catfish -- I didn't care about that. I just enjoyed the challenge of it.

By night the storm had reached hurricane proportions. Twenty foot swells tossed my little craft up and down. It was all I could do to hang on. Only my instincts kept me alive. Just when I thought the Incredible Hulk was out of steam, he'd surge ahead with a sudden burst of energy and me and my tiny boat would be off to the races again. All I could do was smile, open another can of beer, and tell myself, "Mark, it doesn't get any better than this."

But there comes a time when ever a monster catfish can't keep up the fight. Fishing is really a duel of wits, and there was no doubt in my mind -- or that of my wife -- that I was smarter than most fish!

Sure enough, I eventually landed the Incredible Hulk. You probably won't believe this, but what happened was I threw another beer can into the water. When the Hulkster jumped for it, I smacked him upside the head with one of my oars. I had to drink six more beers to do it, but I repeated this procedure a half-dozen times and that seemed to take most of the fight out of the so-called Incredible Hulk.

I recall my trip to Anguish Creek with fond memories. For a while, I had the Incredible Hulk mounted above my fireplace -- not because I wanted to show off -- but just so others would know how much fun you can have from some challenging fishing. I was going to submit a photograph of the Incredible Hulk with this story, but some thieves broke in last night and stole him.