

# Crappie Caravan



## Terry Thompson

has worked as a shoe salesman, truck driver, fork lift operator, manufacturing plant manager, railroad telegraph operator, bridge tender, student train dispatcher, engraver in a jewelry store, lumber broker, and taught ESL to non-English speaking adult refugees. He completed a bachelor's degree in English at the University of Memphis in 1994 at the age of 56 and began a freelance career which so far has covered commercial photography, writing and research, and has settled into heavy-duty research for writers, genealogists, and lawyers. He continues to work out of a studio on Marshall Street in Memphis. He has published both writing and photography and is currently working on a book about the hardwood industry.

See, I owned this bait shop down here at Lake Okeechobee for forty-eight years now. This ain't the busiest lake in the state or anythin' like that but I got some customers who're third-generation --- I used to sell bait to their granddaddies! These guys are serious enough Crappie fishermen and do a pretty fair job of catchin' 'em a limit here and there but always takin' a good mess home to Mama. They're competitive but it's all good-natured fun 'cause they've all known each other since they was kids. I call 'em my reg'lars.

Longest day I live, I'll never forget that summer of '72. Peaceful as our lake is, it's still hard to believe all that excitement happened here. I still think about it a lot and it's been near forty years ago.

I seen some sights in my day, but I never seen anythin' like those two guys in that little red boat. It was a funny lookin' little boat --- actually it was a 12' ski rig. I've never seen a 12' ski rig before and I ain't seen one since. It looked kinda bob-tailed, like they quit buildin' it too soon. But appearances can fool you. I thought it over right smart and it seems to me as if the fish followed that little red boat everywhere it went. I bet those two guys had to hide behind a tree to bait a hook.

There was a big guy and a little guy and I heard they had nine kids between 'em. With that many mouths to feed a fellow has to fish a lot more serious than most folks realize. Then again, though, they seemed a little spooky to me.

Anyhow, they showed up here at the lake every Saturday mornin' fairly early, but not real early, usually after the reg'lars had left in their big bass rigs. Fact is, the bass rigs had been gone a coupla hours before those guys in the little red boat ever showed up. They was serious enough fishermen -- they just didn't believe in gettin' up early, I guess. They'd put their boat in, then they'd come in my bait shop and buy a bucket of minnows from me. They'd both watch me real close because they didn't want anythin' but the small minnows. They wouldn't buy the big ones, always insisted on the little ones. They had a big ice chest full of beer and they'd buy some chips and a few sandwiches, maybe.

The gear they fished with was the cheapest stuff

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I ever seen. I realize that with nine kids and all they didn't have a lot of money to spend on fishin' stuff, but some of those rods and reels they hadn't paid over a coupla of dollars for new! Folks fishin' this lake spend a fortune on gear --- ultra-lite rods and high-priced bass boats with 150-horse motors are the normal round these parts.

Our reg'lars got a good laugh out of those two guys and that ragamuffin little outfit of theirs. The little red boat was funny enough, but, together with all that raggedy fishin' tackle, it was almost more than the reg'lars could stand! I should've known then the laughter wasn't goin' to last long.

Anyways, I guess those two first got my attention that day when I noticed them settin' a hunnert yards offshore, dead in the water. First, I figured they was out of gas, but then I noticed one of 'em throw a fish overboard. After awhile, they threw in another, then another and another. Hell, they was over limit and settin' out there countin' 'em and throwin' the littlest 'uns back so's they'd be legal!

The reg'lars came back in, some of them drivin' rigs that cost near as much as my house, and with all that investment, they ain't caught enough fish to say Grace over. Didn't take 'em long to notice the catch in that little red boat. Seems like it did somethin' to their manhood havin' those two guys show 'em up like they did.

I heard one of the reg'lars ask the big guy where they'd been fishin' and he said back round the bend in the willows. Later that same mornin' I heard another one of 'em ask the little guy where he caught all those crappie and he said they been out in the middle of the lake driftin'. I knowed right then that those two guys was real fishermen cause they was so reckless with the truth!

Anyhow, that's how it went all summer long. The reg'lars with all their expensive fishin' gear had only fair to middlin' results while those two guys in that little red boat caught a limit apiece ever time they put that boat in the water! I never heard so much groanin' in my life --- you'da thought those two was goin' to clean this lake slam out to hear the reg'lars talk.

One Saturday, the reg'lars decided to follow that little red boat and see what it was the big guy and little guy was doin' to catch all those fish. It was the damnedest sight I ever seen --- that little red boat, with about a five-horse motor, wound out for all it was worth, movin' down the lake 3 miles an hour with about fifteen of those big bass rigs, with them 150-horse jobs, tryin' to follow 'em without bein' noticed. Those guys in that little red boat couldn't help but notice, what with those big motors on those bass rigs throbbin' just above idle --- you could hear that throbbin' for a mile --- and keepin' up with that little red boat which was just a strainin' like hell. Wouldn't have surprised me none if all that horsepower from those bass rigs hadn't showed up on the Richter Scale!

Toward the end of the summer, just as suddenly as they came, those two guys in that little red boat just quit comin' down here to fish. Things ain't been the same around here since. I had a lot of fun with my old reg'lars and their big bass rigs tellin' 'em that I'd asked those two guys to go somewheres else to fish for a year or two so our lake would have some time to re-stock itself.

Actually, though, I think we was all kind of grieved when those two left.

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Later, I heard that the big guy had moved back up North and that he had died a while back. I thought I saw the little guy in the grocery store the other day.

Probably should've spoke to him but I just wasn't real sure it was him! If it really was him, I bet one thin', he wasn't in there buyin' no fish!

You know, even after all these years, you get a bunch of the reg'lars standin' around here shootin' the breeze, before you know it, they're talkin' about those two guys in that little red boat. Man, they're legends in these here parts! It's almost like they was supermen or somethin'. We get a good laugh out of it all these years later because even with all that emotion they generated we know'd those two was some sure enough fishermen.

Knowin' they're not comin' back, though, has to make my reg'lars feel a lot more secure.