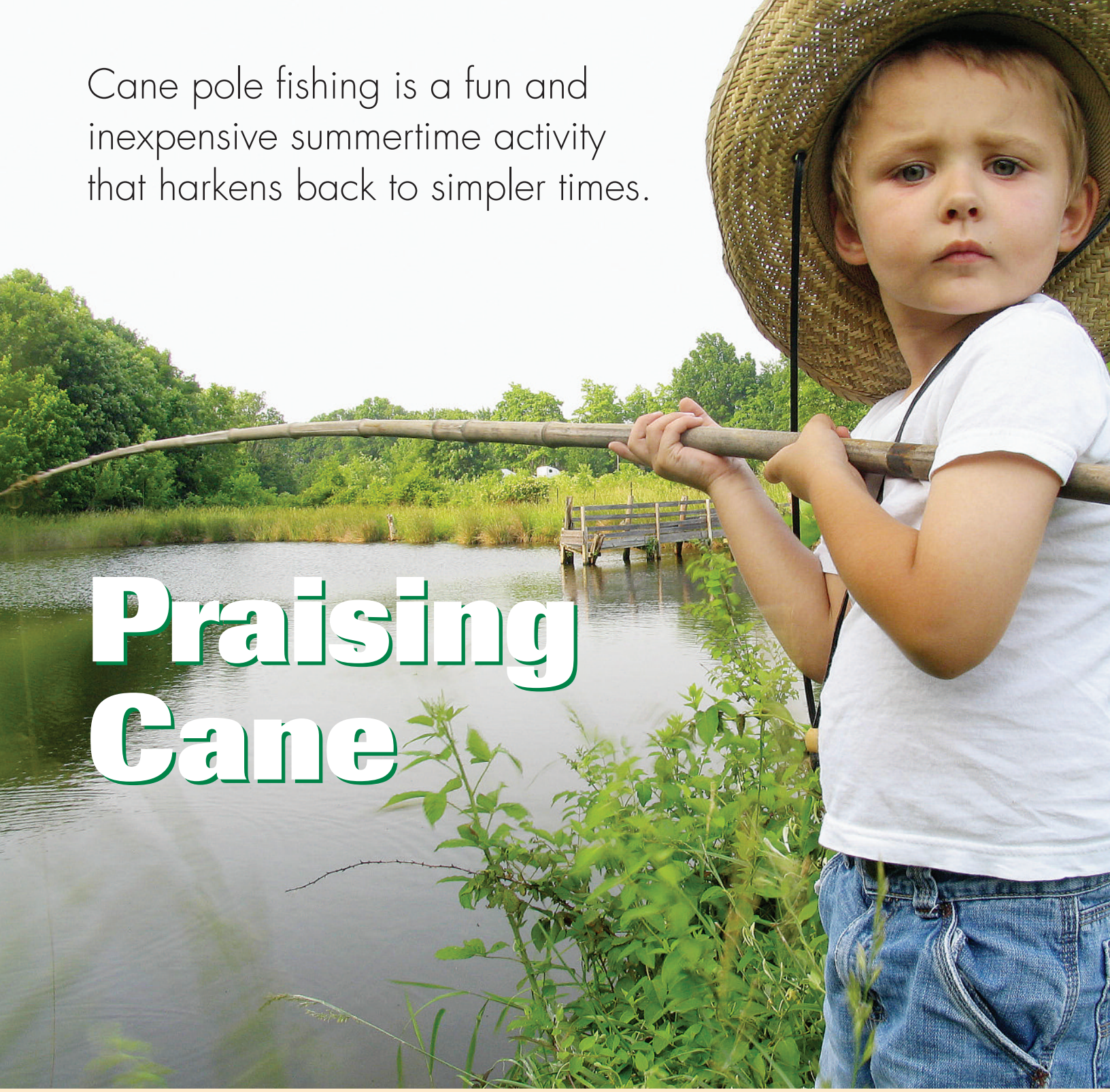
Cane pole fishing is a fun and inexpensive summertime activity that harkens back to simpler times.



Praising Cane

Story By Rich Wagoner
Photos By Mark Rabin

Somewhere in the distant past, a hungry woman sat in a cane break by a clear pool of water watching fish swim by just out of reach. She waited patiently by the water's edge for a fish to swim closer because the water was too deep to scare the fish into the shallows. Memories of the delicious taste of fresh trout drove her desire for breakfast.

Above her, a spider lowered itself toward the ground from the top of a tall, overhanging cane shoot. It spun its line, descending slowly past her face. As the spider got closer to the ground, a gust of wind blew it out over the edge of the water.

In the shadows of the bank's edge, a fat trout waited. It sensed movement and watched reflexively as the spider swung out over the water. Shooting upward, it broke the surface and grabbed the delicious morsel.

As the spider and trout disappeared into the depths, the woman realized there might be a way to catch her breakfast after all. All she had to do was fashion a line like the spider did and a way to hook the fish when it struck. A sce-

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Although not as popular today as it once was, cane-pole fishing is still just as fun for kids looking to spend a great day outdoors.

nario like this might have originated the native technique of fishing with poles made of native cane, a practice that has endured thousands of years and provided food and fun for millions.

Cane pole fishing developed not only a practical way to feed the family but a way to save time and energy hunting for food. Today, anglers can sit patiently by a quiet pool, reflecting on passing clouds and buzzing insects, and wondering at the beauty of nature. Other more efficient ways to catch fish have been invented but they entail spinning reels, setting drags, tangled lines and many more complicated devices.

Cane pole fishing is a reminder that life at a slower pace can be very relaxing. With a cane pole all you have to do is go out to the garage, look up in the rafters for the old, reliable pole your father bought for you 20 years ago, make sure the line is tied tightly and head out to your favorite fishing spot. Stop along the way to dig some worms or hunt up a cricket or two and you are in business.

A cane pole is like a picture album. As you look at it you might remember times spent with friends and loved ones quietly sitting on a sunny bank waiting for noon so you could dive into your picnic lunch. You really didn't care if you caught any fish or not.

The image of the cane pole is a powerful icon in our culture. One major movie company logo shows a small boy in a straw hat sitting on the edge of a stylized moon fishing for what seems to be a dreamy prey—maybe dreams themselves. His cane pole is the conduit for his imagination. It can be yours, too.

Mark Twain's most vivid image of life along the river was Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer sitting on a river bank on a lazy day cane pole fishing and talking about things only their imagination limited.

The strong image recognition of cane is not surprising. Visually, it is truly an amazing plant. Early European settlers in Illinois described thousands of undisturbed acres of cane breaks, with giant cane (*Arundinaria gigantean*) growing as tall as 32 feet. Cane made excellent forage for livestock and was even called "mutton grass" because of its value as forage for sheep. It stays green all year so it was a ready source of fresh protein. Easily harmed by foraging livestock and requiring fire to help generate its periodic seeding and growth, cane has been greatly reduced in Illinois. But cane is a forgiving plant and still survives in a few places, providing habitat and recreational opportunities.

The is no instruction manual with a cane pole and the expertise is usually

A good cane pole is about 1-inch wide and 8 to 10 feet long, but still light enough for any child to use.

handed down verbally from generation to generation. Although every cane pole fisher has their own technique, it usually involves dropping the bait just beyond the shore of their favorite pond.

Some of the favorite cane pole species in Illinois are bullhead, sunfish, yellow perch, walleye, largemouth and smallmouth bass, crappies and, of course, the pound-for-pound favorite, the bluegill. These fish don't tolerate any commotion. It is best to slowly lower your bait into the water and "tickle" the surface to attract their attention.

Naturally growing cane is harder to find these days in Illinois, but it still survives in a few places, mostly in the southern third of the state.

Most fun comes when the fish takes the bait and the thin pole bends down, absorbing the force of the fish. One of your friends will yell "Set the hook!" because your attention has been diverted, pouring an iced tea or watching a water snake glide across the water. It's probably too late by then because setting the hook quickly is critical. But if you are lucky enough to hook up, you will enjoy the thrill of fishing that has made it the number one sport in the world.

Rich Wagoner is from Springfield. An avid outdoorsman, Wagoner enjoys backpacking and other outdoor sports. He resides at Ghost Hollow Guest Ranch adjacent to Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Park near Chandlerville.

Even on the hottest of summer days, a single cane pole and some freshly dug worms can offer fun for all ages.

If you find cane near where you live (probably in the southern third of Illinois) you might want to make your own fishing pole. The best size for fishing is approximately 1-inch wide and about 8 to 10 feet long. Always cut the pole longer than needed and trim off any leaves and limbs. Cut the cane pole at a joint so the end will be closed to keep water out and for strength. Hang the cane pole out of the sun for a few months to dry slowly. Cut several poles so when you test them you can pick the one with the best action for you. Sand the pole with a fine-grit sandpaper and then cover it with several coats of a good, exterior polyurethane coating. Tie on a light test line and a small hook and you're ready to go.

Making poles is a great summer project for children, and they make great gifts for the person in your life who loves to fish.

Make sure you check out Illinois fishing regulations available at www.dnr.state.il.us.

And finally, enjoy your outing. You might just catch a dream, too.

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)