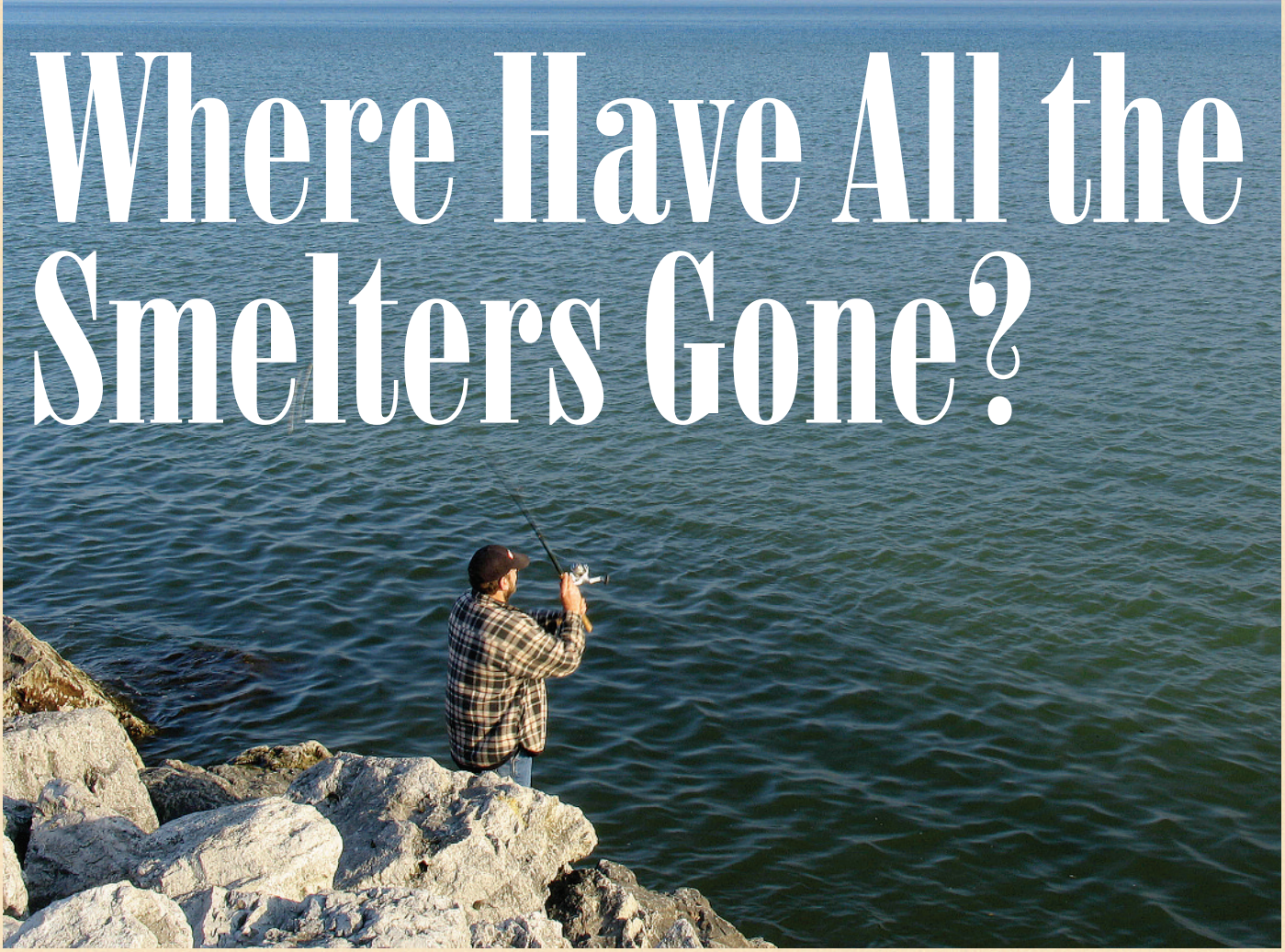
The annual, icy tradition of hauling ashore smelt-filled nets is fading into Illinois history.

Where Have All the Smelters Gone?



(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

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It's nearly sunset late on a Friday afternoon in the heart of rainbow smelt-fishing season at Waukegan's Lake Michigan harbor.

If this were 30 years ago, the beach would be alive. Entire brigades of smelt fishermen would be trudging across the sand to claim lakefront real estate for the night, bent forward, dragging possessions past wind-flattened campfires and streams of vanishing sparks. There's still good light, so tangled nets could still be untangled and shaken, ready for tonight's service. Nearby in the vast, empty parking lots there should be life: eager, new arrivals hurriedly collecting frying pans and net-wrapped poles and bags of seasoned flour from overstuffed trunks. Car doors would slam. Greetings would be shouted in the blustery March wind.

Eventually, the lakefront would slowly darken, and the smelting parties would set their nets. They'd work in sessions until 2 a.m. or later, depending on the run and the willingness to clean and cook. One by one, parties would disappear. Buckets of smelt would be offered to luckless strangers before campfires were doused. Finally, sometime before sunrise, the beach would be empty again.

But nobody will catch a single smelt here tonight. It's smelt-fishing season at the shore of Lake Michigan, yet the few isolated visitors to the nearly deserted lakefront here are walking dogs. One man down by the water's edge along a breakwater is making huge casts with a fishing rod.

A coho fisherman makes another cast at Waukegan's Lake Michigan harbor. Smelt fishermen—and smelt—are disappearing.

"I'm fishing for coho," the man explains. "Nothing yet."

What happened to Illinois' ritual of smelt-fishing? According to Lake Michigan fisheries experts, those shiny, bite-size pieces of quicksilver sportsmen used to haul ashore by the bucket full might finally have been victims of

Smelting gear might include a trolley which allows fishermen to pull nets without wading into frigid waters. Untangling nets is a ritualistic art.

excessive harvest—not by anglers but by other predators. Salmonids such as coho, searching for new food amid the depleted alewife supply, might have shifted to smelt, biologists say.

But it's hard to pinpoint exactly one reason why the fish known as *Osmerus mordax* no longer flood the early spring shores of Lake Michigan during their annual spawning runs. Smelt declines are only part of the complicated biological puzzle that is Lake Michigan. To begin, it should be pointed out that rainbow smelt aren't even native to the Great Lakes.

"Smelt were introduced in the late 1800s up in Crystal Lake, Michigan," explained Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Biologist and project manager Dan Makauskas. "The idea was to feed the Atlantic salmon that were being stocked at that time."

Eventually, the introduced smelt moved throughout the Great Lakes and into the Illinois portion of Lake Michigan. Soon, anglers were crowding the shore each spring, hauling in what seemed a limitless new resource. But the non-native smelt sportsmen loved to net didn't come without a price.

"Smelt are excellent predators of larval fish," Makauskas noted. "Not that smelt represent a smoking gun, but when (smelt) arrived, there used to be six species of native chub in Lake Michigan. Now there's one species left."

Fading quickly from anyone's memory is the fact Lake Michigan fishermen used to have another tradition: hauling in cisco, also known as lake herring (*Coregonus artedii*). The native herring, about a foot in length, were a tremendously popular item in Chicago fish markets into the 1940s. In just one month, some 131,000 pounds of lake herring were received at the Chicago Wholesale Fish Market in 1941. My own father considered them a prize whenever he'd hook one as a boy in Chicago.

But herring suffered massive population declines when a new wrinkle developed: the non-native sea lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*) arrived in Lake Michigan with a vengeance, and by the late 1950s, the sport of fishing for herring passed into Illinois history. Filling the gap were tons of alewives (*Alosa pseudoharengus*), yet another non-native fish that would multiply by the millions and further decimate the ecological balance of the Great Lakes.

Amid all of this, the Lake Michigan smelt population survived, possibly filling part of the ecological territory herring once occupied. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, even as mountains of dead alewives would wash ashore and foul beaches, smelt fishing remained a reliable, if nearly brutal ritual of cold March evenings.

Smelt fishermen would literally throw beach parties to celebrate the arrival of the spawning fish, and for good reason. A single scoop with a big net might produce enough smelt to feed everyone on the beach. Fires weren't built merely for comfort against the damp, cold night. Heavy, iron skillets would be filled with shortening or lard and fried smelt—scales and all—were devoured within minutes of being caught.

"For good luck, you're supposed to bite the head off the first smelt you catch," explained Lori Ralph, manager at the Salmon Stop, a downtown Waukegan bait shop where smelt-fishing gear is still offered for sale. Ralph

For those hardy souls eager to participate in smelt-fishing opportunities, the Illinois smelt-fishing season runs from March 1 through April 30. Individual sites, such as Chicago Park District properties, have local season dates and regulations which must be observed. Consult the current Illinois Fishing Information booklet for additional information, or visit www.dnr.state.il.us/admin/systems/fishing.htm.

For additional information on smelt fishing, visit www.ifishillinois.org/profiles/lakes/lake_michigan/smelt.html.

Cleaning smelt is basically a quick and easy task, although catching smelt is seldom easy these days.

said, despite dwindling success, a few die-hard smelt fishermen today still uphold the grueling spring tradition.

"Guys still go down to the lake, set up nets, open a beer and talk about how good smelt fishing used to be," she laughed. "And they might catch a few smelt—enough to bite the head off of the first one."

But rarely does anyone experience a great night.

"A good night used to be measured in 5-gallon buckets," biologist Makauskas added. "Now the good nights are when somebody catches a few hundred smelt. They've basically been in decline for the past 20 years."

If the trend continues, the dwindling numbers of smelt fishermen and their nostalgic farewell parties might vanish altogether someday. Since smelt never were a native fish in Lake Michigan, their decline in the Great Lakes isn't of grave concern to fisheries managers.

Makauskas said he wasn't aware of any effort being made to resurrect smelt populations to their once-robust levels. If anything, the decreasing smelt populations, he said, might very well open resources for embattled native species, including the nearly vanished lake herring.

"I've seen only one lake herring since I've worked here," Makauskas noted.

It should be mentioned the complex structure of the heavily altered, exotic-filled Great Lakes fishery makes any such recovery, even optimistically, an uphill battle. From the sea lamprey to zebra mussels to alewives and the round goby, the ecology of the Great Lakes has experienced catastrophic, human-influenced assaults during the past century. And while some of those new species gave rise to a generation of wildly popular fishing traditions—including smelt fishing and the alewife-fed salmon bonanza—the displaced native fishery remains an unfortunate example of what wasn't caught.

Fresh-caught smelt breaded and fried still make for great eating.