For all the Heartbroken Fishermen

Story and Photos By
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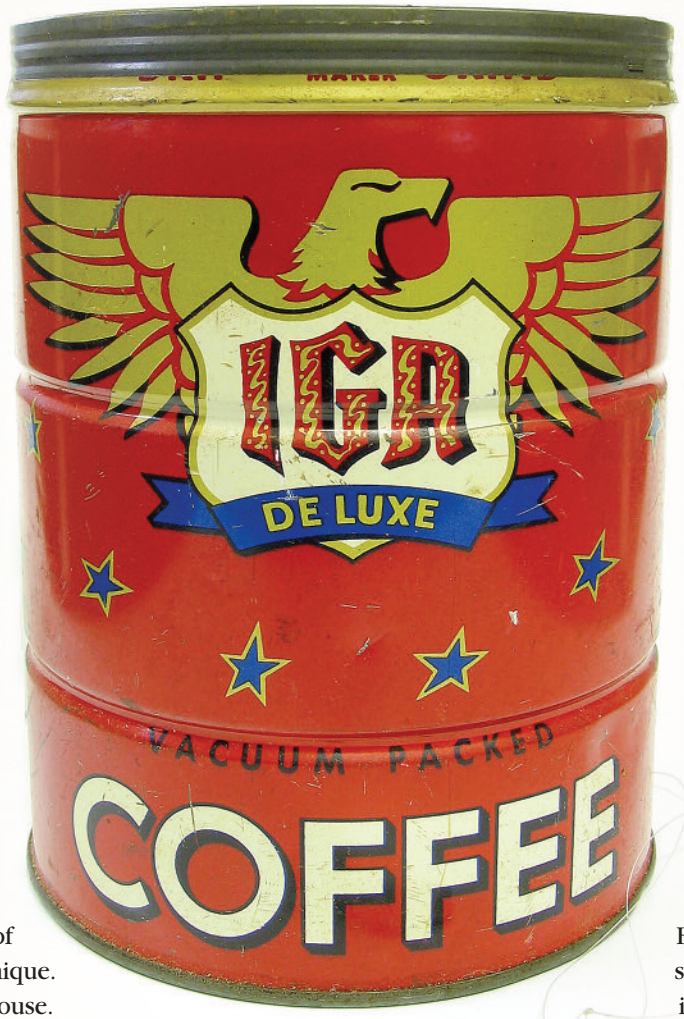

One summer day when I was a boy my father walked out into the middle of the front yard and placed an empty coffee can in the grass. He then called me outside.

"Now listen," began my father's rite-of-passage speech. "Before you can be a fisherman, first you must learn how to cast properly."

My father handed me a fishing rod and reel. The coffee can was to be my target. If I could consistently cast a fishing lure into the can from across the yard, I would become, according to my father, a great fisherman.

"It's simple," my father said. He made a few graceful sweeps of his arm to demonstrate the technique.

Then he went back into the house.

For years I had dreamed of being a great fisherman. It was my destiny. At last, my initiation day had arrived.

I stared at the target, imagining the perfect fisherman's cast. Many times I'd rehearsed this precise ritual in my mind. Leaving nothing to chance, I bent over and picked up a few dry grass clippings and let them fall to the ground, noting the air current. Closing one eye, I sighted down the fishing rod as one might examine a pool cue for straightness: it was perfect.

Positioning my feet squarely, I raised my official casting arm and pointed the rod skyward. I licked my finger to test the wind once more. The new life I'd always imagined was clearly ahead of me—and it would be a great life, a famous life. I saw myself on Saturday afternoon fishing programs, accepting giant trophies following major bass tournaments I'd won easily, cameras flashing, smiling women showering me with champagne.

I was 7 years old. This was my destiny.

With pure confidence I swung my arm and unleashed my first cast. The line swished, the reel spun. History was being made. Yet, somehow, something astonishingly different happened. There was a quick motion in the tree across the yard.

A snag. My lure dangled hopelessly like a failed parachutist suspended in a tree. To retrieve the lure, I pulled the line tight, but it broke—ping—and so did my heart. Defiantly, I tied a new lure.

Within 10 minutes I realized I had the remarkable ability to cast a lure perfectly into any branch on any tree, a trick

There's a reason why snapped fishing line sounds like a country song. Meet the man responsible.

As a boy, *Outdoor*Illinois staff writer Joe McFarland perfected the art of casting into trees.

I could perform even with my eyes closed.

Occasionally my father would glance up from his newspaper and look out the window to see a tree branch swaying. The high-pitched whine of fishing line being stretched filled the neighborhood. It reminded me of those incredibly sad country songs, the kind that make grown men cry—yet still beg to hear every note.

This was not the life I imagined. But I was hooked. Each cast offered a fresh opportunity for redemption and the chance to land a perfect cast and claim my title. Yet all heartbreaks begin with the promise of a happy ending, and following each new cast I would always hear the tragic sound of country music.

Eventually, my father walked slowly out into the yard, head bowed. He looked up at the waving branch in the tree and put his hand on my shoulder.

Both of us stared at the tree as if it held the last of something.

"Just like Hank Williams," my father said quietly.

And then he went back into the house.

Weeks passed. I continued practicing, determined to improve my skills. Yet the heartbreaking sound of fishing line stretching then snapping became the soundtrack of my life.

I began to listen to country music, sympathizing with every heartbreaking verse: broken hearts, broken fishing poles—their tragedy was mine.

"So true," I sobbed. "So true."

And then one day I managed to hit the coffee can. The lure rattled like a chain being dropped. Then I hit the can again—twice in a row. It felt good.

Wiping away tears, I declared myself an expert, my sadness lifted. After weeks of heartbreaking trials, I decided I was finally ready to go fishing.

The Real Heartbreak Begins

Balancing my fishing rod across the handlebars, I immediately rode my bicycle to Lake Makanda where I proudly stood on the shore and demonstrated perfect casts, one after another. It was the best day of my life: The sun was shining. Fishermen waved at me from their boats, tipping their hats. A light breeze carried fragrant scents across the water. Everything was perfect.

Suddenly the water exploded in fury. I saw a huge mouth, and dark eyes. On my first day of fishing I was about to land a monster largemouth bass. It was as if everything was finally coming together. The line screamed out from the reel, tightening, pulling harder against the squealing drag—the bass

(Photo by Dan Furmanik.)

Hank Williams (center) and his Drifting Cowboys. Steel guitar player Don Helms (upper right) found inspiration for his mournful sounds while fishing with Williams.

was charging for deep water. It leaped, flipping, then again, shaking wildly as the line stretched and whined. And then the bass leaped again, twisting, pulling, its mouth opened wider still.

I can see it today.

Of course the line broke. Ping-ing. The sounds trailed across the water and immediately the fishermen in boats removed their hats and began to cry. The birds ceased to sing. Skies darkened.

I will never forget that day. Yet I was hooked for life.

The Fisherman Who Started it All

I have now spent the majority of my life making casts that ended in tearful tragedy. I've also spent as many years listening to country music, enjoying the same results.

Last summer I drove down to Tennessee to find out why.

Even if you've never heard of a bass fisherman named Don Helms, the sound Helms makes with his favorite musical instrument—the steel guitar—is unmistakable. It turns out, this 81 year-old bass fisherman is none other than the last surviving member of an outfit called Hank Williams and the Drifting Cowboys, as in *the* Hank Williams, country music's legendary, long-departed pioneer. Although Williams died back in 1953 at the age of just 29, the haunting sounds Helms played in the studio more than 55 years ago continue to make generations of listeners—including fishermen—break into tears.

A short distance from Nashville, I walked up to a pleasant-looking house and knocked on the door.

"Can I help you?" a smiling man answered. It was the man himself: Don Helms.

"Tell me something," I told Helms after introducing myself. "Was Hank Williams a good fisherman?"

Immediately the smile disappeared from his face, his eyes narrowed.

He waved me in and closed the door.

"Let me tell you about fishing with Hank Williams," Helms said, each word increasingly tense. "There's something you should know."

For the next hour, Helms revealed what had been unspoken for decades.

Occasionally, his wife Hazel would set down her crochet needles and peek through the curtains to see if anyone was watching. The secret ingredient of country music was at stake.

It turns out, the man who recorded "Your Cheating Heart" and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" was a crappie fisherman—a truly annoying crappie fisherman. When Williams would ask

"My fishing pole broke."

—Hank Williams

Helms to go fishing, he'd make Helms drive for hours up to Kentucky Lake while Williams slept. The trouble would begin the moment they hit the water.

"Hank liked to use the biggest minnows he could get," Helms recalled. "The problem was, you'd have to duck every time he cast because he was all over the place. He'd rear back, slap you in the face with a big minnow, then say something smart like, 'Why don't you watch where I'm casting?'"

The fisherman who invented the heartbreaking sound of country music playing his original steel guitar at a 2006 concert near Rend Lake.

Country music pioneer Don Helms explains the mystery of tangled fishing line to writer Joe McFarland.

Helms, the bass fisherman, fumed in the front of the boat. As each fishing trip progressed, anxiety built.

"Hank didn't own a boat but he owned an outboard motor," Helms said. When the two musicians would rent a boat at Kentucky Lake, Williams would take control of navigation duties, always maneuvering the boat in his favor, sometimes jamming Helms into brush. Lines would tangle—then snap.

The heartbreaking sound of their own music became the soundtrack of their fishing trips.

Finally, at the end of the day, Helms would drive the car back to Nashville while Williams slept again.

"Wanna go again tomorrow?" a refreshed Williams asked after they arrived. He was a hooked fisherman, and so was Helms, who continues to fish for bass today. Yet the man who continues to play heartbreaking sounds on his beloved Gibson steel guitar has never landed what all fishermen dream about: one monster trophy.

"The biggest bass I ever caught weighed 5 pounds," Helms said, dabbing his eyes.

And then he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Fish long enough," he said, "and eventually you'll cry."

So true … so true.

On A Sad Note

Don Helms died in Tennessee August 11, 2008 at the age of 81. Shortly before his death, Helms received a draft of this story and was able to provide additional details of his fishing trips with Hank Williams.

"Not every fishing trip with Hank was that bad," Helms told OI staff writer Joe McFarland. "We had some good times."