

Carver Update: Jode Hillman



(Editor's note: From time to time we like to run what we call "Carver Updates." In this particular instance the carver himself tells the story of his most recent creation.)

I was hoping you would consider using this for a future "Carver Update" column. It is something new for me, and I thought your readers might enjoy seeing it and hearing the story that led to its creation.

Being an avid fisherman, I had wanted to make a fish carving for myself for quite some time. However, I could not settle on what the subject matter should be; so it remained an "undone" project for the past few years. That changed recently when a friend and I were talking. He relayed to me the "banner day" he and his son had on the river fishing. When I remarked, "That's a once in a lifetime kind of day; you'll remember it for a long time," it reminded me of just such a day I had more than 20 years ago and set the stage for the creation of the piece you see here.

It was the summer of 1990, and I was just out of high school. I was staying with a friend at his uncle's house in Ocean City, New Jersey. His Uncle Anthony was a longtime shore resident and lived in a weather beaten bungalow at the south end of the island. It abutted an undeveloped state park that was nearly a pristine dune and bay habitat, great for hiking, fishing and getting away from the otherwise maddening summertime shore crowds. We were staying with his uncle to scrape, paint, and weather seal the house before another long winter of windy salt air.

Anthony was also an avid surf fisherman, perhaps the main reason

he employed us to work on his house. It was around 3:30 on a Friday afternoon in late August, and we had been scraping cedar siding since about 7:00 a.m. I looked up from my work and saw Anthony running up the beach and waving his arms. I thought someone must be drowning or need help for this sixty-something, heavyset, chain smoking man to be moving so fast. Well, I was wrong.

When he reached the house, his first words were, "Drop what yer doing, boys; the tide runners are in the surf!" I had never heard that term used before; and though I knew it referred to a fish, I didn't know what kind. We grabbed some spare rods and took off down the beach at a run, following the trail of cigarette smoke that curled from his Marlboro.

We ran for a block or two, reaching an old defunct fishing pier that had been rendered unusable by the March, 1962 Nor' Easter that devastated the New Jersey coastline. A long rock jetty flanked its southern edge, and various pilings and old debris lay littered to the north. Immediately, we tied on small half-ounce shrimp-colored buck tails Anthony had made. I imitated what the others were doing — a long arcing cast, past the breakers, then short fast hops coming thru the wash. On the third cast my line tightened up and the drag started to peel. I set the

hook like I learned from largemouth bass fishing, and the line went limp. Anthony yelled down the beach, "Not like that ya' knucklehead; you'll rip its lips off!"

The next cast started with the same tap and run, but this time I let the line tighten up on its own. Soon, I was sliding a fat 22-inch Weakfish onto the beach. I'll never forget those vibrant blue, purples and yellows that reflected in the sun. It was like a diamond lying in the sand. I put that fish into a cooler and the three of us continued catching 17 to 28-inch "tide runners" for the next hour. I don't remember the exact number we caught; I stopped keeping track after a ten or twelve for myself, but we easily landed thirty fish that day, six of which we brought home for dinner.

That was the last time I ever caught Weakfish in such numbers and size. Though once abundant on the Mid-Atlantic coast, their numbers have been declining steadily over the past decades, nearing a point that makes many wonder if they can ever rebound.

My friend's uncle has since passed on, his bungalow replaced by million dollar condos. The old pier still stands, but it is much worse for the wear. My, how things change! However, when I look at this plaque, my memory of that day and its place in time will remain fondly strong.

The 18-inch Weakfish is hand carved from Paulownia wood and brush painted in oils. The Weakfish's characteristic "Buck" teeth are copper wire. The background is oils on board and measures 24 by 17 inches.

(Readers may contact Jode Hillman by email at: jodehillman@comcast.net)