

HOW A CRIPPLED, OLD, VILLAGE RESIDENT COUGHT HIS "OPUS" FISH

Alaska is famous for its huge halibut fish, but not many of the really big ones are landed...simply physics. After many years fishing at the same Sitka lodge, in the same boat, with the same captain, I finally caught "the big one." "On Golden Pond," this fish would have been called "Old Walter."

As I reach my "Autumn Years," I keep thinking this will be my last fishing trip...but not yet. This past year was my first to go fishing via airport wheelchair and "special handling." Arriving in Sitka, I was met, fed, bedded and delivered to my boat for the first day of fishing. The Wild Strawberry Lodge certainly knows how to accommodate, recognizing that this old man with a cane is going to need some "special accommodation."

So...I made it. Cap'n John has me aboard "The High Roller," a 32-foot "mooching" boat. We are blasting over the Sitka Sound powered by 500hp of twin Yamahas. It's colder than a witch's tit, but the lodge has provided excellent foul-weather clothing including warm boots. I've packed away my cane and am hanging on the boat railing compensating for no sea legs. I know Cap'n John is wishing "...I wore a younger man's clothes."

We stopped in about 200-feet of water and "mooched" up our limit of king salmon and also a limit of rock fish. Both me and my old fishin' buddy, Ben, talked Cap'n John into finding us some "barn door" halibut. Cranking up the big Yamahas, John started searching the bottom structure in halibut country. We anchored up and broke out the heavy rods, baiting up with slaughter-house-size meat hooks and bait the size of a small dog. Halibut fishing requires patience so we sat back and waited about an hour for the first action. We caught a couple of 100lb-plus halibut and were pretty well pleased. Then..."TA-DUM...TA-DUM," remember "Jaws?" Get ready for the fish story!

My rod shows some action...Cap'n John is suddenly interested and starts "advising" this old, experienced, halibut fisherman. "I got it, John." "Yeah, but this is a really big fish!" "I got it, John." Hit 'em Dick!" "I got it, John."

"And now the rest of the story..." as Paul Harvey would have told it. After about 40 minutes of cranking and the beginning of my old back "crick," this big mother just doesn't seem to be moving. My old fishin' buddy, Ben, recommends that he "take over." "I got it, Ben." The fish starts to move and "Pow!" My rod holder is in the oldest of the boat's rod holders and the rod holder shatters, pieces cutting my arm. Fortunately, the rod is also secured to the boat and does not go overboard. The three of us man-handle the rod to another rod holder and I am back in action...both tired and now bloody. My ole buddy, Ben, still trying to "take over." "I got it, Ben." "Nice Try!" I'm still working this fish...everybody seems to want a piece of it. This is my fish...I hooked it and by gosh I'm gonna land it...if I'm lucky.

After another 20 minutes or so, I work the fish up to the surface..."my god it's huge." Cap'n John and the deckhand maneuver the tired fish back the boat's transom door and haul it aboard. It measures seven-foot-two inches and the chart says 267 pounds.

End of fish story...not quite. We hung the fish for pictures, and bandaged my bleeding arm. I took much-needed nitro and an oxycontin , stretched out on the bunk and called it a day. Not bad for an old Village curmudgeon, huh? Dick Hoover

If you are interested in a great fishing trip in the great bass fishing state of Texas, or would like to join a trip for reds and spotted trout on the Gulf, contact the Village Fishing Club. And, remember, Alaska is just a wheelchair ride away.

