

TWENTY-ONE

NAVIGATIN' FOR NAMAYCUSH

“Namaycush,” the fish in this story, is an aboriginal word for fish, but the full term refers to the biological name for a type of freshwater salmon found in central and eastern North America, *Salvelinus namaycush*. It is possible that Tex could have known this aboriginal word, but since the word does not refer to fish or groups of Native people found in the Rockies, it could also be that Tex knew the scientific term. It is not the only time that Tex uses correct scientific terminology (see “Rams”). Instead of a way to showcase his work for the Smithsonian, this time the technical reference is the source of the joke in the story, where Tex pretends that he and Sawback have been conducting “scientific” research during a rather unfortunate attempt to catch a fish. As in other stories, Tex combines down-home phrases with Latin references, classical allusions, and Hollywood to make him seem as if he belongs in the Rockies, but can make fun of redneck habits at the same time.

—JR

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By N. Vernon-Wood

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR when winter dallies in the lap of spring, an' the geese are flyin' north. It's open season for bear, poets, an' sulphur an' molasses; time to oil saddles an' think about breakin' the odd colt. It's also the season when you're always sort of fed up with what you have been doin', an' get to wishin' you was a parson, or a fan dancer—or somethin'.

I've just got in from the Kootenay Flats with a bunch of ponies I'd wintered there, an' if you think I didn't have one hell of a time, you're crazy. Them bone-heads was feelin' altogether too good, an' I wore out three good saddle horses hazin' them critters hither an' yon. Just about the time I'd have 'em headed down the trail for home, some onredeemed filly would duck her nut, kick at the sun, an' tear off into the timber in the general direction of Vancouver, takin' half the herd with her.

By the time I'd have them headed off, the rest of the bunch would be loopin' down the back trail, like cats shot in the tail with a bootjack. However, I finally got 'em into the home pasture, after three days' honest-to-gosh bush wranglin', and am settin' out on the stoop, wishin' I was Clark Gable, an' that Jean Harlow was in the cabin makin' sour-dough biscuits, instead of me havin' to do it, when I hear footprints.

It's Sawback Smith ridin' his wall-eyed pinto. He drops the reins an' comes over. "Don't you never do nothin' but set an' lissen to the music of the spheers?" he asks.

"Shore; sometimes I set an' lissen to eegerious hombres that talk just to hear their teeth rattle," I tells him. "What's on yore mind, besides yore hair?"

"I figgered I could mebbe sell you a few bronks. I got more than I got range for, an' I'll make you a good deal on a flock of unbroke three-year-olds," he sez.

"You can't, an' you won't. I'm surfeeted with bronks, broke, unbroke, or just so-so. I don't give a long-drawn-out hoot in hell if I never see another horse, pony, cayuse, mustang, or even a three-toed eohippus. I'm goin' to shoot my own bunch, an' be a Vulga boatman, or a millionaire's chauffer. I'm fed up an' stove up, so you shut up an' unload that skinful of misery you're ridin', an' go inside an' rustle enough grub for both of us. When I've et, mebbe I'll feel more human. An' mebbe I won't, seein' who's doin' the cookin'."

As a matter of fack, Ol' Sawback is the best cook west of the Great Lakes, so about an hour later I'm feelin' more like a white man agen. I reckon that's what makes me strike at his bait.

We're layin' on the bunks smokin' when he asks: "Did you ever fish Devil's Lake this time of year?"

"Nor any other time," I tell him. "I ain't got a boat, it's too far off my range, an' what I don't know about lake trout would fill a liberry. Besides, there's good fishin' right here in the Pipestone."

"An' stream fishin' don't open till July, an' the lake will be legal on the 15th of May, which is four days from now. Jim Barker told me he'd loan me a boat any time, an' I can get Pat Rogers to drive us over in his flivver. Let's you an' me take a tent an' some grub, row down to the east end, an' camp for a few days. We can fish an' relax our souls; they won't be no ponies to wrangle, an' nothin' to do but angle an' eat."

It seems like a right pious idea. I shore need a change, an' settin' in a boat draggin' a spoon on the end of a line sounds right *dolce far niente*, as they say in Ensenada, so I lets myself in for it.

THREE-FOUR DAYS LATER, I hear what sounds like a chivaree comin' over a rough trail, an' Pat Rogers' chariot comes to a sudden stop with the radiator halfway through the gate.

Ol' Sawback unwinds hisself from the off gate-post, an' we load up our flea bags an' camping outfit. I take a rod an' reel along, in spite of Smitty's insistin' that they are onnecessary, this bein' a trollin' proposition.

Pat, besides bein' Irish, an' therefore some mercurical, drives like they's a warden after him, an' they's a couple times before we get to Barker's when I almost wish I was sittin' on some ornery knothed that is only just buckin'.

More by luck than judgment, we get to the lake an' find Jim's boat. We load our junk aboard, Sawback takes the oars, an' we push off.

There ain't any place where the lake is more than a mile wide, an' Sawback tells me that he saw 300 feet of a surveyor's chain let down before the end touched bottom, an' I don't need anyone to tell me that if the water was any colder, Sonja Heinie could use it better than us.

When the ice breaks up, which in this neck of the woods is around late April or early May, the prevailin' wind, comin' from the west gradually drives the ice down to the lower end of the lake. Here it piles up, makin' a field that sometimes you could drive a team over, an' sometimes not. Sawback claims that along the edge of this ice-pack is where the real top-hole fishin' is. Lakers runnin' up to 60 lbs., f.o.b. He says that as long as the water stays cold, an' the ice is there to make it colder if possible, the big fish feed close to the surface. As summer comes along, an' the temperature rises, then the trout duck for deeper depths, an' are fussy as to what they will strike on.

Well, the ice is waitin' for us. The last half mile of lake is plumb covered, so we beach the coracle, an' make camp about a hundred yards back in the spruce.

By evenin' we've got all organized, with a woodpile a jeraff couldn't see over. It seems kind of strange not to hear the horse bells, or worry about how far you'll have to walk for a saddle horse in the mornin'. Just before I drop off to sleep I say to Sawback that this looks like money from home. I've noticed that the grass here is belly deep to a tall Indian, which makes it a cinch that did we have the hosses along, they'd leave it an' drift eight miles to where it wouldn't run half a ton to the section. The only reply I get sounds like a dull buzz-saw hittin' a railroad spike.

Seein' Sawback's done the heavy work yesterday, I'm out first next A.M. an' start the coffee goin'. When the bacon is done, I stick my head in the tent an' ask can he stagger out an' get it, or does he expect room service. He grabs his pants an' a towel an' sprints to the lake, while I put one over by washin' in nice warm water in camp. I never was one of these-here cold-plunge addiks.

I hear Smitty makin' one godawful racket down to the lake, an' think mebbee I'd better drift down an' see has he dropped his store teeth in. When I get there he's cussin somethin' scandalous.

"That onmentionable dingey is adrift about 200 yards off shore, an' why

in the name of the little pink pajamas of Frank Buck's pet python didn't you tie the perishin' thing up?" he wants to know.

"Shucks, I thought it was broke to stand with the reins down," I tell him.

WELL, WE CAN'T COAX it back into camp with a pan of oats, so we draw straws an' natchelly I get the short one. Nobody's ever complimented me on my figger; in fack, I got to stand twice in the same place before I throw a shader, so when I get cold, I'm cold all over an' plumb through. Before I've caught up with that gallopin' galleon I'm so chilled I'm spittin' hoar frost. I climb aboard, scrapin' enough hide off'n me to make a man-sized hankerchiff, an' paddle back to camp strokin' anyway 75.

Half an hour later, Sawback wants to know are we goin' fishin' or do I figger on standin' around camp all day, tryin' to shiver myself warm, so we go down to the oomiack, an' I haven't any good argument to bring forward when he says I'd better do the rowin' as the exercise will keep me from solidifyin'.

Did I say Devil's Lake wasn't any more than a mile wide? Mebbe it ain't the first three-four times you row across, but by the time curfew tolled the knell of partin' day somethin' has happened. That lake is not 10 miles wide, by 400 knots long. I've got a couple of half hitches in my vertibra, four blisters on my lunch hooks, an' a sliver where I can't see it. Sawback has enough trout to make a meal, if we use all four of 'em.

"What were you sayin' about sixty-pound trout?" I ask next morning, while I'm tryin' to straighten the kinks in my framework.

"They're here," he sez, "an' I know guys who have took 'em."

"Yeah, but you an' me ain't goin' to be any of 'em," I reply. "Me, I'm goin' to try this rod, with a spinner, an' play with the little fellers. You, Sawback, can come along an' play you're an outboard motor."

The lake is smooth as ten-year-old Scotch. Sawback pulls slowly along the edge of the ice field, an' I spot a rise just ahead. One of them slow, easy breaks, that generally indicate big fish. I've rigged myself with a six-foot leader, a No. 6 pearly spinner, with a slice of fish belly on for added attraction. The first cast draws a blank, but as I'm recoverin' on the second, I feel somethin' like I've snagged into a small log. There ain't any rush like a cutthroat makes, nor any of that vibration you get when you set your hook in a rainbow in swift water. I give a light pull, just to see am I into a sleeper or an old boot, an' that fish comes to life. He tries to get under the ice, an' I have a hell of a time turnin' him. Then he makes a run straight

for the schooner, an' I'm reelin' in at 1100 r.p.m. as he ducks under the boat with a flock of slack line. Then he decides to go an' see if Sawback was lyin' about that 300 feet of chain, an' the rod looks like a barrel hoop. It's a good thing our pinnacle is built like Kate Smith, because I'm bracin' my Number Twelves against the gunnel, an' Sawback is jumpin' around yellin' what he thinks is technical advice, but which I'm too busy to attend to.

Don't ask my how long that feller fought; you know dang well you'd lie about it yourself. But I have to wrangle with him quite a while. Of course, we don't have any landin' net, so I have to get him plumb tame before I reel him close enough for Sawback to slip his fingers under the gills and heave him aboard. No, he ain't any record in the light of day, but he'll go mebbe eight pounds, an' he's 128 ounces of hard fightin' meat.

"Lissen, feller," I sez, after I disgorge the spinner. "If these babies will come up for this, they'll rise to a fly. I'm going to try a Royal Coachman an' this Ibis that a pilgrim give me last summer."

"I always thought you was some loco, but now I know it. Nobody ever took trout in this man's lake except on a troll." This is all the encouragement I get, so I make a proposition. I'll fish off the ice pack, and Sawback can take the dingey an' drag his loors over the back, an' we won't be crampin' each other's style.

I CLIMB ONTO THE ICE, an' get ready to commence to begin. For a while it looks like the old hoss there is right. I cast, an' cast, an' cast some more, without a rise. I've got some fed up an' careless, when I see there's somethin' doin' at the boat. Smitty has dropped the oars, an' is hauling line. About twenty feet astern, a fish that looks like Moby Dick hisself busts water. An' just when I ain't attendin' to my own knittin', I get me a strike. I'm standin' on the edge of an ice pan that slopes down into the drink, like the gable end of a Dutch house, an' next think I know, I'm on the part of me that chairs are made for, slidin' slow but steady in the general direction of an unpremeditated bath. I cling to my rod with one hand, an' grab for a holt with the other, but on that ice there ain't any holts. Just as my pants begin to fill up, I roll over an' start to crawl real celerious. I just make it, but the tip of my rod's busted, an' ole Cristivomer is gone with my fancy Ibis an' half the leader.

"Gentle Joseph," sez Sawback that night for the ninety-seventh time, "but you shore looked superfluous, slippin' down that ice on your tail."

"Mebbe so," I reply, very dignified, "to a low mentality like yourn, but

us pioneers always expect hardship an' discomfort when we're engaged in scientific research."

"Research?" sez old Sawback.

"Shore," I sez, edgin' for the portals of the rag house: "ain't I researched an' proved them namaycush'll take a fly?"

Which I figger I have.

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