



## W. J. "Smilin' Bill' Jamison II

By Dan Basore

A lot has been written about W. J. "(Smilin' Bill)" Jamison and the W. J. Jamison Company one of the "Big Ten" tackle manufacturers in the early 1900's.

This Smilin' Bill is W. J. "Bill" Cullerton II, his grandson who is a living legend with 60 years' experience in the American fishing tackle industry.

We already have a lot of the facts on the history of the W, J. Jamison Company from patents, catalogs, articles and artifacts they made. The Coaxer was their first lure with production beginning in 1904 and a patent issued on January 1, 1905. But in an interview and several visits with Bill Cullerton we can now share some of the feelings and personalities of these early pioneers.



Jamison Coaxer

## THE EARLY YEARS

William James Cullerton was born in 1923 and named after his grandfather William James Jamison with his first and middle names. His direct memories of his grandfather are intertwined with so many verbal and written histories and photographs that he feels as if they were together for more than the three years they shared on earth.

Cullerton's father was an electrician for the city. One of his jobs was to replace the mules used to power the draw bridges over the Chicago River with electric power. The late twenties and thirties were tough economically, so Bill moved in with his grandmother and Uncle Theodore (Ted) Nordholm, her brother.

Ted was a bachelor who also worked in the Jamison tackle business and was quite a fisherman. Many times Ted would take his nephew with him in his Model T Ford on the long three hour drive to Lake Geneva or the Chain of Lakes in Wisconsin from their Chicago home. Bill had a favorite warm spot on the floor where he would sleep on these early morning journeys.

There were two reasons for the early starts that would have them on the water before day break. First of all fishing was consistently better before the sun was higher in the sky than the tree tops. But secondly, after they caught a load of fish on the Jamison baits, they would haul them around to show off to other boats whose occupants always wanted to know what they caught them on. Bill learned early on how to sell fishing lures. They would return home with fish to eat and cash. Ted taught Bill a lot about fishing, selling and life. He caught some flack once for taking the lad to see Sophie Tucker!

## MAKING LURES

Bill remembers tying flies and helping to make other baits on his grandmother's kitchen table at a very early age. While still in High School he began to earn a paycheck dying buck tail, pouring lead, packaging and shipping.

During summer vacation from school from 1937 through 1940 he guided in the Hayward, Wisconsin area. Here he could really learn "in the field" what lures would catch fish.

This combination of manufacturing, fishing, and guiding experience would provide a solid base for his future life's work. His interaction with people to persuade or sell them on using a particular lure in a specific way in a specific place uniquely qualifies Bill to provide advice to others to this day.

## World War II

Many know W. J. "Bill" Cullerton mainly for his accomplishments in the World War II. He served in the U.S. Army Air Force from 1942-1946 and was a fighter pilot in 1944 to 1945 based in Steple Morden, England. He is credited with 27 enemy aircraft destroyed and holds the following decorations: Prisoner of War Medal, Air Medal (7 Clusters), Distinguished Flying Cross (4 Clusters), Presidential Citation, Purple Heart, Silver Star and Distinguished Service Cross awarded for the destruction of eight enemy aircraft in one day. He holds the 8th Air Force record for fifteen planes destroyed in two missions.

His story as an escaped prisoner of war was told by Joe Foss in his book "Top Guns." He recently served on a Presidential delegation led by the Vice President to Warsaw to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Polish Uprising and was decorated by the Polish government with the Polish Uprising Cross for flying escort for American bombers dropping supplies to desperate Polish citizens in September of 1944.

## BACK TO LURE MANUFACTURING

After his return from the war his father passed away in 1948. With his mother now the titular head of the W. J. Jamison Company, Bill rolled up his sleeves and began working in an industry that was exploding with demand as GIs returned home and life became more normal.

There was a real spirit of cooperation among many manufacturers at the time. John Bently the Midwest representative for Mustad accompanied Bill

on his first sales trip. Soon they were not only building their own baits but making lures for others.

They tied feathers and assembled Heddon's King, Queen and Ace spoons; they painted and assembled Cisco Kid baits for Art Wallsten until he moved the company to Florida. They also made some baits for South Bend and made the Gamegetter for Western Auto.



**Whistling Bobber**

The Jamison Company did a lot of work for Sears in 1947 and 1948 tying and carding three double wing divided dry flies which they wholesaled for thirty one cents. Late in 1948 the Sears buyer called Bill in and handed him a card of similar flies for his evaluation. They were very good beautiful copies Bill admitted. The buyer revealed that he could buy them from a Japanese source for eleven cents for three carded and gave a one year notice of termination.

Bill continually would bounce back from these challenges. He found a man in Kansas who had a unique bobber that would whistle when pulled under the water. Sam Lando an original equipment manufacturer (OEM) developed a way to make them. When the Jamison Whistling Bobber was introduced everyone wanted one. They sold a ton of them and could have sold many more but they could only make 1,400 per shift. Even with night shifts they couldn't keep up with a market that would have consumed 5,000 per shift.

The beer bottle lures were also very popular with bottlers giving them as promotional items. Bill and his sales people helped to create that demand by stopping at every bar they passed ordering a beer

and then asking where their free lure was like the other bars were giving away.



### **Beer Bottle Lures**

A very enjoyable part of the tackle business was time spent with other company leaders. There was a real spirit of cooperation with people like Ivar Hennings of South Bend, the Shakespeares, Charlie Helin, the Heddons and the Pfluegers. In meetings of the Associated Fishing Tackle Manufacturers these independent men had no problem speaking their mind and holding fervent positions. Their first secretary Pete Hoyle with the Union Company and later Cortland would lead them to consensus and they did many things that still serve fishers today.

Bill could sure sell but he didn't enjoy the manufacturing business. When Doc Wellman who had a company that represented Arbogast, Penn and others offered Bill a job he took a year to sell the company to Max Shannon with proceeds to his mother and sister for whom he felt responsible.

Bill loved that part of the business and Doc Wellman dearly and even named his first born son with his middle name after him. But he wanted the same thing for his family that Doc had. In 1959 he formed the Cullerton Company and represents many top lines including Zebco, Plano, Rapala and others. On a recent visit three generations of Cullertons were observed working there.

Bill has received numerous awards including the first Sportsman of The Year award by the Illinois Sportsman Society, listing in Larry Columbo's book, *America's Top 100 Living Legends*, the Association of Great Lakes Outdoor Writers Golden Glow Award, 1995 Illinois Communicator of The Year, the Fishing Hall of Fame and many others.

For twenty years Bill has hosted the popular radio show "The Great Outdoors" on Chicago's leading radio station WGN, AM 720 Saturday mornings at 6AM.

It is a privilege and honor to nominate W. J. "Bill" Cullerton as an Honorary Member of the National Fishing Lure Collectors Club for his sixty years of contributions to fishing. We look forward to honoring Bill at our annual meeting July 7th, 1995 and to many more years of his active participation in our great sport.

Honorary Member - 1995
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