

The Lures He Left Behind

We are oft remembered for the little things we do.

The heat descended upon Chicago like the breath of a dragon. During the one week stretch of relentless heat and humidity in July of 1995, streets buckled, rail lines warped, the power grid flickered and sometimes failed. The heat index at times exceeded 120 degrees, causing people to find relief in any way they could. Those fortunate enough to have air conditioning stayed inside, those with fans merely recirculated hot air. Thousands of fire hydrants opened by citizens in hope of a reprieve ultimately had to be locked in place by utility workers. The workers in turn were often pelted with bricks and rocks by people they denied a cooling shower. Emergency medical personnel and city hospitals were overwhelmed. The elderly suffered the most. Often immobile and alone and unable to cope with the extreme heat, hundreds were snuffed out. When it finally ended, at least 465 deaths were attributed to the heat wave. Among those who succumbed was a man named Edward G. Strey. In the aftermath of his death, relatives would note that an air conditioning unit, one that might have saved him, sat unused in his garage.

The ensuing estate settlement generated a call to collector Randy Hilst, who was referred by someone at Schroeder's, the experts in antique toys. It is because of that call that we have a limited knowledge of Edward Strey and we know a little bit about the lures he left behind. What Randy learned is that his estate consisted, in part, of a large assortment of tools, a few guns, a Harley Davidson motorcycle and some fishing lures. The lures were made by Strey himself, and according to the family, he sold them while on vacations in Wisconsin. Three paper fishing licenses issued in 1935 were found along with the lures. Resident licenses for the state of Illinois were purchased by Strey and his wife and Strey also bought a non-resident license from the state of Wisconsin. As the story goes, Edward Strey sold enough lures during his trips to Wisconsin to offset the cost of the vacation. One can almost see him peddling his lures at bait shops next to a picturesque lake.

Quite clearly Strey was influenced by the design of Creek Chub lures, for some of his surviving baits closely mimic the Creek Chub Pikie and the Dinger. His lures were neatly fashioned and nicely painted. Given the fact that so many tools were found in the estate, it seems likely that he was either a carpenter or accomplished in a similar trade.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to know more about

Edward Strey was lost in 1995 when the lures changed hands and we are left to fill in the blanks when questions arise. Most likely he created his lures during the long Chicago winters and had an ample supply on hand when he traveled to Wisconsin for his summer vacations. During the Great Depression many small fishing tackle companies failed and even the largest lure companies had to make adjustments in order to survive. But a crisis for one entity is an opportunity for another. Strey's lures would almost certainly have been sold below the going prices of established companies. The difference of a dime undoubtedly swayed many fishermen who were keeping an eye on their pennies. If you could offer a quality lure at a bargain price—especially a lure that had been fished with success by others—people would step up to buy it. Small bait and tackle shops that dotted Wisconsin lakes, affected by Depression-era belt tightening, would perhaps welcome the chance to stock favorably priced lures or reach an agreement to sell Strey baits on consignment.

The 1935 paper licenses give us a chance to pause for a few moments to consider the news Strey would have read or heard about that year. In 1935 the National Football League held its inaugural draft, and Jay Berwanger, who played nearby for the University of Chicago, became the first pick of the Philadelphia Eagles. It was the year that the dirigible USS Macon crashed in the Pacific Ocean. In 1935 Babe Ruth was released by the New York Yankees and Persia renamed itself Iran. Nylon was discovered, Radar was patented and the first automatic parking meters were installed in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It was in 1935 that the Supreme Court ruled that the National Recovery Act was unconstitutional, and that meant that the NRA eagle stamp affixed to many products, including some lure boxes or fly rod lures on cards, would soon disappear.

That Strey was talented enough to make his own fishing lures and confident enough to market them on the road during very difficult economic times says much about the man. That some of those lures survived and were purchased by a collector six decades later was pure chance, but it was a purchase with implications. Lures that would otherwise have been viewed as well-made but unidentified folk art are prized collectibles today, clearly connected to their maker. It is a small remembrance, a limited legacy, but one that no doubt would please Edward Strey. 🐟