

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

John Bulmer

Night Safari: Searching for Nightcrawlers and Summers Past

by Jenna Kerwin

We went ahead of our fathers in a row of five, almost (but not quite) in a run, wanting to be the first kid to find one. Our flashlights shook from our excitement; the torch glow broke the darkness, sending beams of light through the trees. We were young and carefree, and our bare feet squished along the fairway. The grass, wet with dew, stuck to our feet...but we didn't care. We were on a mission; we were searching for nightcrawlers.

Each summer, years ago, my three younger cousins, my older sister, and I would often search for those elusive nightcrawlers. Hunting for the slippery, slimy earthworms was a tradition. We would run across the golf course behind “Tutu and Papa’s” (our names for our grandparents) house, with nothing to keep us from exploring the night world. But it wasn’t just an excuse to stay up and run free; we were gathering bait for the following day of fishing with Papa.

On warm, sunny mornings, Papa would take us fishing at Sunset Lake (really a small pond), and we needed bait to catch pumpkinseeds (or something larger if we were lucky). Buying worms at a store was simply not an option. And forget about fishing lures and flies—that was not the way Papa learned and that was not the way our fathers learned. So, naturally, that wasn’t how we learned.

Instead, our patriarchs taught us to find our own bait. We set out on our night safaris like Kipling characters, peering between blades of grass and around bushes, looking for our skittish prey. And our prey was everywhere. If you tiptoed



The author, cousin Kelsey, cousin Kara, sister Laura, cousin Ian.

and flashed your light quick enough, you could spot dozens of them before they disappeared beneath the earth.

“There’s one! Get it!” we would whisper-shout to each other. “No, over there! Quick!” and we’d pounce onto the grass, our hands desperately reaching for the slippery, spaghetti-like creature.

When we managed to grab hold, we’d laugh and tug gently—like our dads taught us—then pull the nightcrawler from the soil and place it in our plastic pails. And when all was said and done, we *had* to compare who bagged the most worms. (This almost always resulted in our dads splitting our loot so that everyone went home with the same amount.)

Truth be told, we were probably more excited to search for our bait than to actually use it. We were squeamish kids, after all. Though there was something honest and elemental about learning to bait our *own* hooks with our *own* earthworms. With Papa guiding our nervous, little fingers, we learned more

than the proper way to bait a hook; perhaps even more than how the food chain operated in Sunset Lake. We learned true life lessons.

Our fathers weren’t simply noting the delicate composition of earthworms when we tugged at them; Dad and Uncles Scott and Evan weren’t just keeping the peace when they split our loot. They were teaching us to be forthright and confident, but also to be humble and pragmatic. Papa taught us to keep things in perspective. In his own way, he taught us that the world is bigger than just five kids along the edge of a small-town pond.

So maybe it’s not just searching for nightcrawlers or (perhaps secretly for some of us) baiting our own hooks that we all enjoyed during those summers. Maybe what we really liked, and what I at least, still search for to this day, are the teachings of our fathers.

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