

Florida

SPECIAL 50-PAGE
SPRING FISHING ISSUE

Fishing · Hunting
· Conservation ·

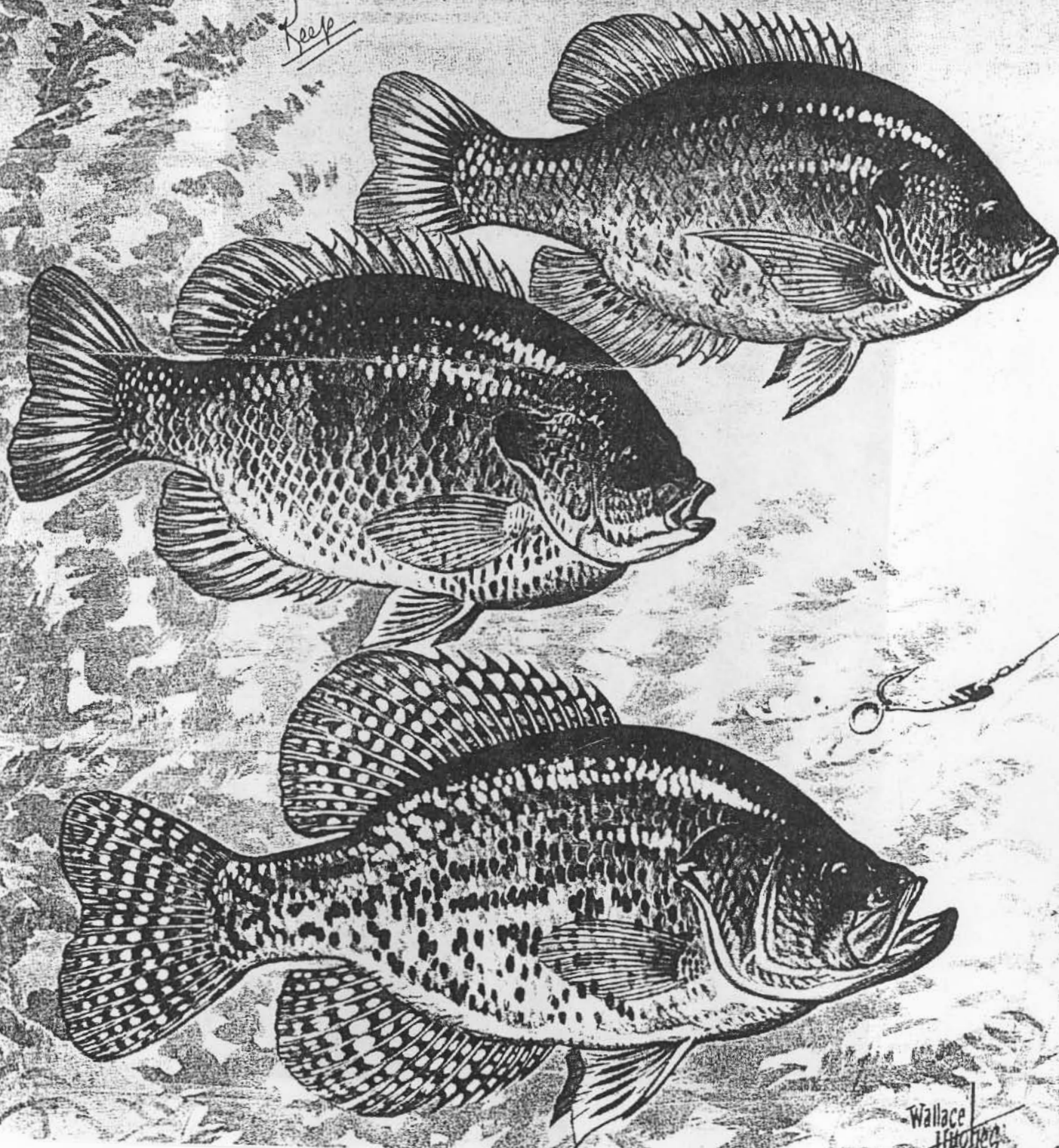
WILDLIFE

APRIL, 1960

The Florida Magazine for all Sportsmen

25 CENTS

Keep



Wallace
Hatcher



Fitzhugh Carter's fishing ranch is made up of 30 ponds spread out over 2,300 acres.

SCHOOL TEACHERS AND FISHERMEN must have faith. They also must have patience, must be practical and not afraid of hard work.

Find a practical school teacher whose problem is to find the fishing he loves and anything can happen. It has.

It's a 2,300-acre fishing ranch made from some 30 ponds linked by canals 10 miles south of Wausau in Washington County.

It's the property and hobby-turned-vocation of Fitzhugh Carter, 53, who retired from teaching at Vernon High School in 1957.

Dry Pond is the largest and gave the most trouble. Its 1,000 acres stretch for over a mile now taking in the 10 Green Ponds partially lost among the sandhills.

The system is fed by Pinelog Creek and ultimately drains into the Choctawhatchee River, 15 miles west.

The ex-schoolman charges fisher-

If you should fail to catch any fish, you get a "rain-check" and can try your luck some other time.

men \$1 each to fish in any of the ponds 5 a.m. until 8 p.m. They can also hunt game in season at no extra charge. Of course they must have a valid Florida fishing or hunting license. Visitors may picnic free during the day but are not allowed to camp overnight.

If you should be so unfortunate as not to catch any fish, you get a 'rain-check,' to try your luck again 'on the house.'

Miles of trails—Carter doesn't know how many—winding through the sand hills are marked with signs and arrows at intersections, but if you're not careful you can get lost.



For a small fee, you
have 30 ponds to
try your fishing luck on . . .

Florida's Fishing Ranch

By MEL TENNIS, JR.

At least that's the way it seemed to me.

I know my way around half a dozen big cities, but this fishing ranch in southern Washington County baffles me. Ponds pop into view in the unlikeliest places, over a rise or around a bend, and they stretch back under the trees all over the place.

To link up all of the ponds, canals meander all over the place like a Venice in the sand hills laid out by Rube Goldberg, the cartoonist.

This pioneer do-it-yourself conservationist readily admits that his fish-
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ing ranch is a kind of crude, home-made job, but—what is strange and wonderful in these inflationary times is it's not financed. His 2,300 acres of sand and water are not in hock to some lending institution. Carter is a pay-as-you-go-type. The only people off and on his payroll for the past ten years have been the drag-line man and the bulldozer operator. They'd be working long enough to use up his spare cash and would come around again the next month for more.

The canals, dikes, dams and spillways connecting and controlling the water in the ponds makes a bewildering pattern, but it works. The proof is in the fishing.

While we stood at the edge of Dry Pond—which Carter trusts will never be dry again—a couple of air-men fishing from a boat held up a big bass that looked like it weighed seven or eight pounds. Carter said that it's nothing unusual to pull in five and six-pound bass and that the largest ever landed weighed 13½ pounds.

Other fish caught are blue gill, shellcrackers, crappie, warmouth and jackfish. With the help of Jerry Banks from the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's office in Panama City, Carter stocked his first pond in 1951 with bass, blue gill and shellcrackers. His procedure was to get the rough fish out and restock before any pond was connected to the system of ponds and canals.

First he would seine out all the fish he could in a lake then would poison to be sure they were all out.

Carter related that some biologists can tell a male bass from a female but that he didn't know how. As it turned out it didn't make a lot of difference. He'd put in two or three dozen adult fish and they knew who were males and females. It was no problem for the fish. The ex-school teacher gave them an "A" in multiplication.

He has set aside several small lakes as hatcheries to produce fingerlings for restocking any lake that gets low.



The 30 ponds are all linked by a series of canals.

"I fooled with this 'cause I wanted to fish," he explained, adding that the high water in 1940 gave him the idea of holding all the water in the ponds.

Born a mile away he had watched the ponds wax and wane all his life. In the years after a rainy season the ponds would be brimming full and the fishing was good. Then the drought would come. The ponds would shrink to mere potholes and Carter would have to go far to indulge his favorite pasttime.

Dry seasons particularly rendered Dry Pond and the Green Ponds wretched for fishing because their natural source of water, Pinelog Creek, had been diverted to supply Dykes Old Mill Pond ever since 1873.

As long as the ground remained full of water after heavy rains, the ponds would remain full. Once the subsurface water drained away as happened during dry years, the water in Dry Pond would gurgle down a big sink hole as if someone had pulled the plug out of an enormous bathtub. The only way to keep Dry Pond permanently wet was to plug the hole.

In the 1940's Dykes grain mill shut down and the Old Mill Pond was abandoned. It was then that the

Vernon school teacher decided to turn the creek back to its original course to nourish Dry Pond and the 10 Green Ponds.

The first step was to acquire land. Carter bought his first 200 acres of near worthless land in 1941 at an Internal Improvement Fund auction. His top bid was \$5 per 40 acres. Inheriting 400 acres from his father, Carter had accumulated 2,300 acres by 1954.

There was a flood in 1948 but by November 1954, it looked like north Florida was well into a dry season, Carter recalled. Though Dry Pond and the Green Ponds were still full, there was no telling how much longer the underground waters would remain as a safeguard against Dry Pond suddenly draining into the earth.

Invisibly and silently one Thursday in November mother nature pulled the plug on Dry Pond. The thousand acre pond began to sink from sight at the rate of one foot a day. By Sunday it had gone down four feet. Hurriedly Carter bulldozed an earthen dam across a narrow part of Dry Pond to hold the waters back from the sink, but that

was only a strategic retreat to gain time.

The bulldozer cautiously shoved earth and stumps into the big hole but that did no good. Water could be seen sinking in the hole 15 feet down. And to make things more difficult, Carter couldn't find a dozer operator who was willing to take on the hazardous job of driving a 30-ton machine to the very edge of the big hole.

"I'm going to fill it up if I have to haul rocks in with a wheelbarrow," Carter declared as he and Jerry Banks made plans to shoot the works.

Finally finding a grizzled veteran 'dozer operator who had gouged roads up and down the Rocky Mountains and who snorted his scorn of the sink hole, Carter and Banks decided to go-for-broke.

They got a case of dynamite, lit two long fuses, dumped it in the sink and ran for cover.

It went off with one hell of a roar! The whole swamp shook, they related, as 45 dead fish popped to the surface.

Thirteen and one-half hours later the Rocky Mountain bulldozer man

had scraped thousands of tons of earth and a kind of limestone goo found around the area into the bothersome hole. He filled it in and for good measure triumphantly rode his machine back and forth on top of the hole to make sure the plug was tight.

Rental of the bulldozer was \$135, the best investment he ever made Carter says.

With the hole plugged up Carter went ahead with diverting Pinelog Creek back to its original course to supply Dry Pond and the Green Ponds. To do this he put a dam with spillway and a dike between Dykes Old Mill Pond and Dry Pond.

To let his bulldozer man know how high to push up the dirt for the dam and dike, the backwoods engineer cut off cypress saplings at the water's edge at the height he wanted. Then he stuck old empty oil cans on the stobs and all the 'dozer man had to do was shove the earth to the height of the cans.

Carter said that people called him 'pond-crazy' for putting his life savings and most of his income into the project. However, he had no children to dote on and he and Mrs.

Carter were thrifty in their habits as most country people are.

Some of the canals cut 15 to 20 feet deep through the sand hills give the impression that much expensive dragline work was done. Visitors shake their heads over how it was accomplished by one school teacher in his spare time.

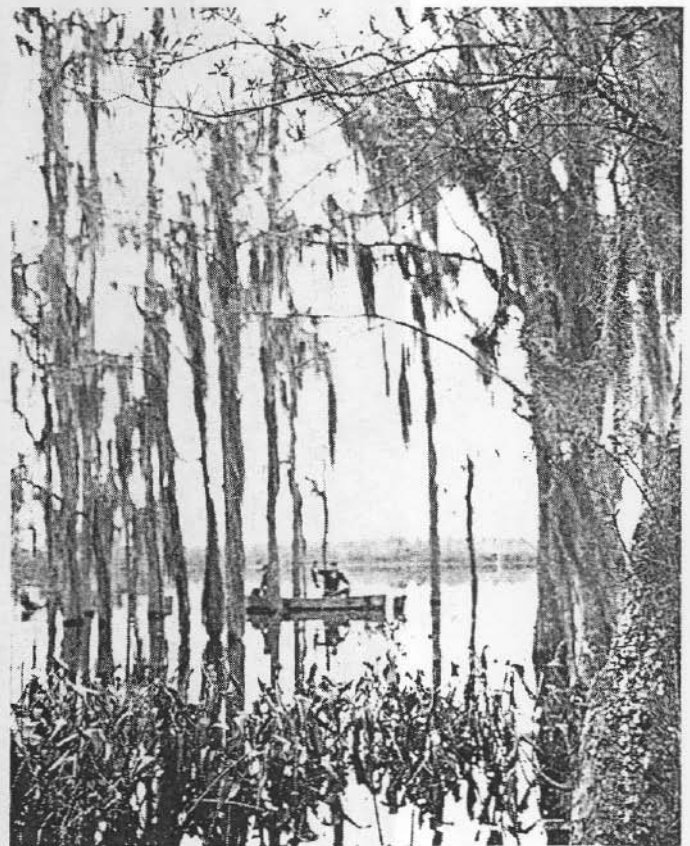
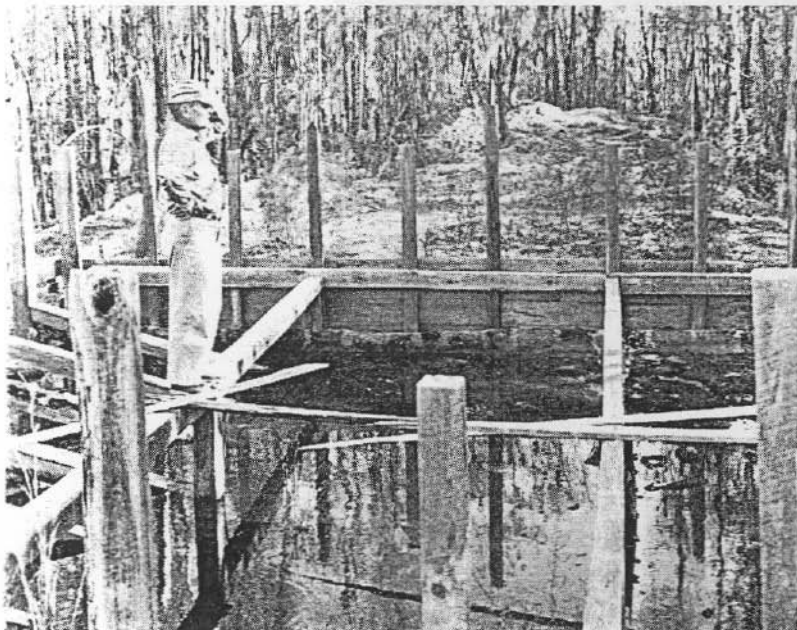
Carter said that it wasn't as difficult or as expensive as you might think. "The water level in one of the lakes would usually be higher than it was in the other. So we'd scratch the surface just enough to make the water flow and then the water itself would cut through the sand and do a lot of the work." Most of this kind of work would be done when the ponds were very full.

He made the water work in another way. Lily pads clogged the 75-acre Dykes Old Mill Pond so thickly that fishing was impossible. With the aid of his dams, dikes and spillways, Carter raised the water level in the pond a couple of feet over the big bonnets, killing them and making the surface clear once more.

Referring to his project as a
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Anglers visiting Florida's fishing ranch will find good quantities of bass, bluegills, shell-crackers, crappie, warmouth, and chain pickerel.

An intricate system of dikes, dams, and spillways is used to maintain water levels.



large ants inside the container and used the improvised bait as a slowly retrieved casting plug. Both ideas added fish to his stringer.

Another enterprising angler who ran out of bait while pan-fishing, rolled small pieces of Kleenex into fairly firm balls, dipped them in the oil remaining in the sardine can from which he had just dined. Carefully placed on the point of his hook, the oil-saturated bits of paper proved both attractive and tasty to several large bream.

When necessity has called for such action, successful baits also have been fashioned from empty cartridge cases, cigar butts, pipe cleaners, corks and rubber bands, fingers of old gloves, clothespins—and even a two-sided picture of a fish, sandwiched between thin sheets of clear plastic!

Many fish have been taken on strips torn from fishermen's shirt-tails, and trolled. As a substitute for natural eel baits and pork rind—

favorites for black bass—pre-cut pieces of chamois to desired shape, dye and store in scented solution until needed.

For snook at night, try cutting out a fish-shaped piece of thin cardboard about three inches long and attaching it to the hook of a ¼ ounce yellow jig. Fished around docks, piers and pilings, the combination is proving productive in the Marco area.

Fishing success often depends on how bait offerings are presented.

Fool wary fresh water fish by hiding a hook baited with live worms inside a mud ball, then let the fished baits work free naturally as the water softens the mud.

When still-fishing from an anchored boat, you might try removing float and sinker from your line and allow baits to gradually drift downstream. To keep baits down sufficiently long to interest bottom-feeders, you can add a soluble Alka-Seltzer tablet.

A somewhat similar idea for the

caster, who needs sinker weight to obtain casting distance, is the use of sinkers made from a water-dampened mixture of eight parts dry, sifted sand and two parts technical ammonium sulphate, and fitted with "line eyes" while still damp. Dried in a home oven, the sinkers will be as hard as stone, but will fall apart as soon as they hit the water, permitting a cast bait to perform thereafter without the drag of a sinker.

Many good fish have been lost by failure of dip nets to open up to full size during the netting operation. Placing a small lead sinker in the very bottom of a landing net will cause it to take proper shape immediately on being picked up.

Recently the nation's newspapers carried a dramatic story of a discouraged musician who committed suicide because he had reached the conclusion that songwriters had exhausted all the possibilities of the musical scale. Obviously, the fellow was never a fisherman. ●

FISH RANCH

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'cheap-type operation,' Carter listed his own tools as a sawmill, an old truck he picked up for \$50 and a jeep. He traded an old sugar cane mill for the saw mill and cut his own timber for dams, bridges, spillways, benches and boats.

Most of the 50 boats seen around the ponds he made himself. He doesn't rent boats and visitors use them at their own risk. Some sportsmen bring their own boats. It's possible to take a scenic fishing trip for miles from one end of the chain of lakes to the other via the canals.

By setting out a few thousand pines each winter, Carter has reforested about 200 acres in recent years. He anticipates that turkey, squirrel and quail will become more plentiful as natural cover increases.

The season is always closed on deer. The ones seen on the ranch are just passing through, he said, though the entire ranch is surrounded by 10 miles of fence which he put up.

Wild ducks and geese sometimes visit the area. To encourage them to make it a habit he plans to do some planting to supplement the natural food supply.

Otter live in the ponds and canals and their tracks can be seen in numerous spots. The season is always closed on them. Carter has always been very fond of the little animals.

The Washington County fish rancher thanks State and U. S. wild-

life officers, the Soil Conservation Service, Agricultural Extension Service and other public agencies for their advice and help in planning the project. A number of those officials feel that he is pioneering a new way to make profitable use of unproductive lands and that his project might be duplicated in a number of areas in Florida.

Others question whether Carter's ponds will hold their water in a sustained drought when underground water is gone and porous limestone passages dissolve or fall away. Carter who knows the limestone sink country from long, hard, intimate experience is reasonably confident of the future. He is going ahead this year with stocking a new lake with fish and adding it to his collection.

He is betting his life savings against old mother nature who might have a trick or two up her sleeve. If she tries to put him out of business, he's sure he can counter punch with a few cases of dynamite and a bulldozer. ●



"Any Luck?"