

John's Barra . . .

A gentle story of the one that didn't get away . . . and the life long affect it had on the very young fisherman involved.

Words by the fisherman, John Turnbull, illustration by Greggo.

Once upon a time long ago, when I was the ripe old age of four, I was allowed to explore my bush and sugar cane surroundings, as long as I promised not to go near the water.

Fortunately, our back yard abutted a steep bank which fell away to a fresh water creek bed approx. 300 metres wide, and in those days, the channel ran about 20 metres wide against the far bank, except in flood times when it would be up to a kilometre wide over the cane fields.

Plane Creek as it was known, had a large area of sand and gravel with vegetation all pointing down stream. There was a grove of guava trees as well, but in those days they were not classed as "exotic fruits" and were known as "Pluggers" due to the loud moans heard from the backyard outhouse if one over-indulged on the succulent fruits.

While exploring these wild jungles I came across two swaggies camped in the riverbed, Mick Foley and Patty Milton, [the world would be a better place if there were more people like those gentlemen] with a few sheets of corrugated iron leaning against a bottle brush tree, a stone fireplace, a couple of

heritage type swags and "bobs your uncle".

I spent many happy and productive hours with these two. They taught me to swim and once they were satisfied I could swim well enough, they gave me a fishing line, [rods were almost non existent then] and proceeded to turn me into a fishing fanatic, an addiction I still have not recovered from.

I played at being a bushman and living off the land (hence the pluggers) and was introduced to eels as a delicacy. I have never forgotten the taste of the first one I caught which was a hooter – it was longer than me, and when I took it to the camp Mick skinned it and cooked it in the pan; I can still taste it.

As the years progressed I graduated to more sophisticated tackle such as a stick from a young sapling with about three metres of line attached to the thin end and a bottle cork tied about 50 cm above the hook.

Below our house was a dam the Power Alcohol Company built for process water for the factory. After the floods had subsided, tarpon would swim upstream as far as the dam wall, and I discovered that if I berleyed with garden worms one day, the next day I could catch 40 or 50 of them up to 12 cms in length. [Looking

back, I think Dad taught me to dig worms so he could have a garden].

The larger of them I slabbed, cut into chunks and salted in an old jam tin and this became the secret bait when worms were scarce.

One time when the dam was overflowing about 10 cm I noticed the water on one end of the dam wall spilled onto a slope, and ran along the wall and over a slab of concrete. Water would hit this concrete and pour into the stream and cause a boil which no self respecting fish could resist. With the luck of the devil I would stand on the edge of the water and cast the line over the boil and work it up and down the current. I knew the cork had to slope a special way to prevent it from being caught in the boil.

I am not admitting to how many hours I spent perfecting this, however a barra of approx. 60 cm swallowed the bait - and

what a thrill that was!

On hooking the devil I had to run across the slope, jump down onto the rocks to pull it in and bag it, whereupon I heard my mother calling from the back yard that supper was ready.



Not being very obedient, I decided to be overcome with an acute attack of deafness, fished a little

longer, knowing that the razor strap awaited if I remained too long.

Sure enough, not two minutes later an enormous fish nearly pulled me in with it, so I ran across the wall, slipped as I jumped, and landed in the water . . . but eventually, I won the battle - and managing to bag the barra which was over a metre long. I headed home with a grin on my face a cricket bat had no hope of removing.

The way home was about a kilometre and I was almost home when I noticed I was limping badly and discovered I had a large bruise under my foot which I don't remember getting, but it was worth it.

I often think how nice it would be if someone would invent a time machine to take me back to those old days when time moved at a much slower pace and we never even had a lock on our front door.
- John Turnbull

Footnote: Whilst the name "John Turnbull" may not ring a bell initially with F&B readers, he's actually been 'one of the family' for many years - as "my mate John" who regularly fishes with Neil Dunstan and is proudly the second of the 'two silly ol' farts' fishing team! Thanks John - it's good of you to share such special memories with F&B readers - PW