



Hooked on fishing

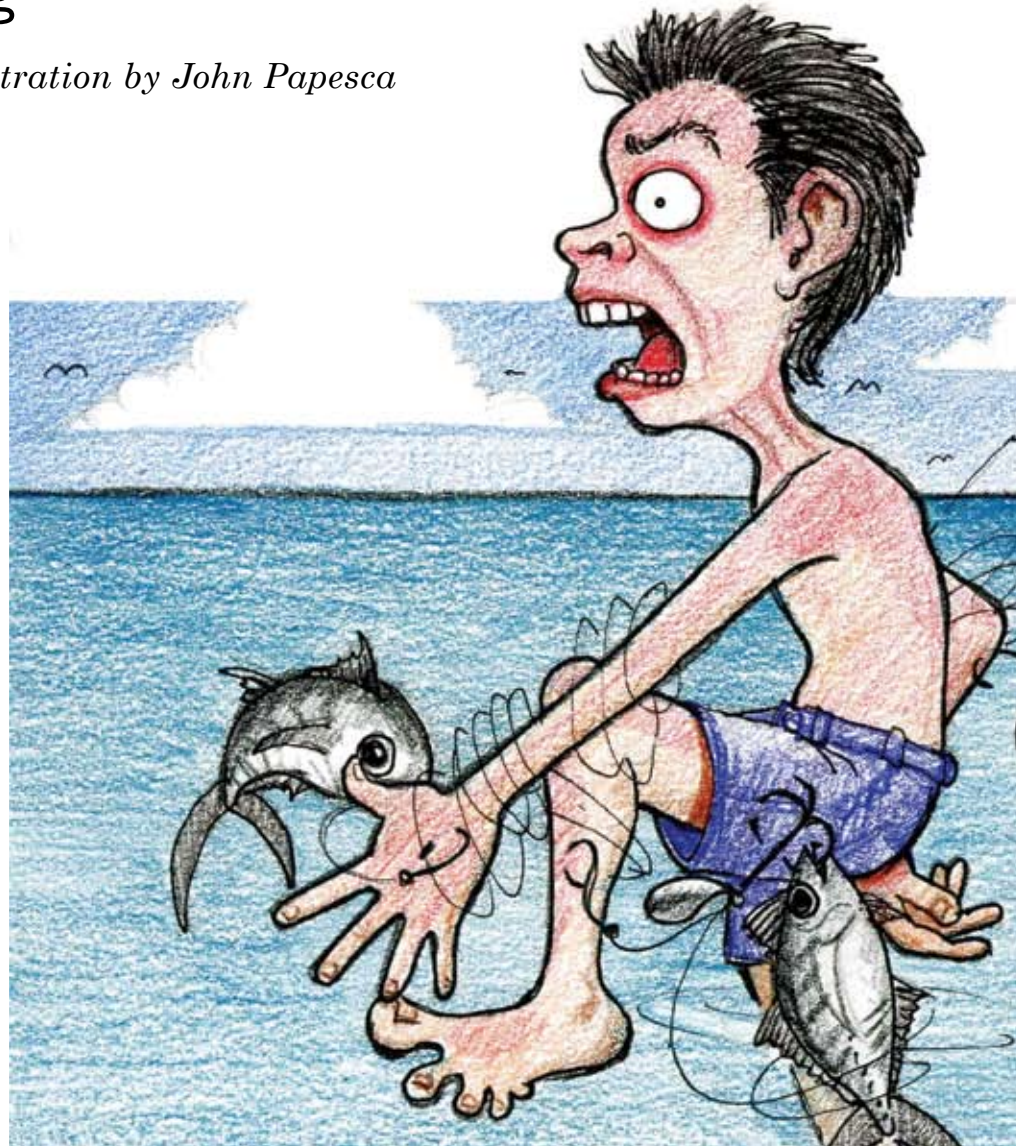
By Barry P. Tuveson ~ Illustration by John Papesca

My dad and I often fished along Florida's gulf beaches. We would wade, sometimes up to our waists, into the surf to cast. Because we side-stepped as we cast, we could end up a long distance from our starting point, so it was impractical to take along additional rods or tackle boxes. My dad wore a hat which held extra lures and leaders. I wore cut-off jeans and kept leaders in my pocket and an extra "mirror lure" hooked to the waist.

One day, we arrived at the beach at first light. My dad headed for the water's edge a few minutes before me and saw white water flashing as baitfish tried to escape predators.

I was held up because I was rigging a new invention – a mirror lure trailing a speck rig. With the speck rig, two light-weight lures hanging 18 inches apart, I frequently caught two fish at a time. I reasoned that if I tied a speck rig to the gang hook at the tail of a heavier lure, I could not only cast farther, but possibly catch three at a time. Not all of my ideas were brilliant when I was 18 (or now), but surely this was a winner.

As I reached the water, bait fish erupted in front of me. I waded in to my waist and, on my first cast, got a hit. Then I got another hit and thought I felt a third. I saw fish flashing and knew they were hardtails (blue runners). Hardtails are small, almost inedible and generally a nuisance when you're fishing for table fare. They also are fast and powerful and can



be fun to catch if nothing else is biting. Better yet, they usually manage to wiggle off your hook so you don't have to bother removing them.

This time, however, they did not unhook themselves. When I reeled them in I discovered I had two on the speck rig and one on the mirror lure. Success!

I stuck the rod under my arm so both hands were free to remove the fish. I held the head of the other lure in my right

hand and used my left hand to remove the first fish from the hook – that was my objective anyway. The two fish hooked on the speck rig continued to struggle in the water.

The combination of fish thrashing in the water and a fish flopping on the lure caused a hook to go through the webbing between the thumb and forefinger on my right hand. I let out a yelp, jerked and then yelped again as the lure flipped, and



two hooks sank deep into the back of my hand.

I had just graduated from Navy boot camp, where I had taken an advanced course in the art of cursing. I was a poor student and had not mastered the language. Or so I thought. Having three fish yanking hooks in my hand led me to discover I had a full arsenal of ammunition, and I let it fly.

Suddenly, all of the bait-fish in the Gulf moved in to

surround me. With them came more hardtails than had ever before gathered in one place. One grabbed the lure I had hooked into my jeans and tried to make a run with it. Fortunately, two prongs of a gang hook jerked deep into my side and it wasn't going anywhere.

I was now distracted from the hooks in my hand. With my left hand, I reached down to grab the fish, thrashing at my side. I grabbed part fish and part

lure. Two prongs of a gang hook sank deep into my palm. My left hand was by then hooked to my side – and to a thrashing fish. I wanted my mama.

“Help!” I yelled as I headed for the beach.

My dad, about 100 yards away, turned and waved. I yelled again and he waved again. Finally he figured out I wasn't just being friendly and came running up the beach. He immediately took the fish off the hooks. What a relief!

We walked back to the car, and he got the pliers.

“Son, I don't know where to start,” Dad said.

I convinced him it didn't really matter where he began. The important thing was to start. I was a bloody mess by the time he cut the barbs off and removed the hooks.

We walked down to the beach so I could wash away the blood. Instinctively, my dad picked up our rods and took them with us. I eased myself into the water. The saltwater immediately soothed my wounds.

Suddenly, the water in front of us erupted. My dad helped rig my rod and we headed deeper into the water. We caught some of the biggest specks either of us ever caught.

I learned a good lesson that day. Big specks are a lot more fun to catch than hardtails. **FW**

Barry Tuveson lives with his wife and daughter in Alabama. He's been an avid and inventive fisherman all his life – and has the scars to prove it.