

Ode to the Penn "109"

The first time I set eyes on this "Mighty-Midget" line-winder was almost half-a-century ago off the west coast of Vancouver Island, nudging a kelp-bed, and surrounded by the calm Pacific. All was quiet but for the shrill-enthusiasm of the reel as it challenged a superb Coho. Encouraged by two, talented, callused thumbs and in the hands of a master-angler it performed flawlessly. I was witnessing a rare engagement, and I was bewildered. How could such a tiny spool, attached to an anything-but macho rod, handle such a challenge without even a grunt? I was to learn, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

At the time I owned and operated a small, millwork company in Nanaimo, British Columbia, and was the prime supplier of yellow-cedar millwork items to a large company in Seattle, Washington.

The company had a very interesting sporting//entertainment program for a few of its very high-volume, Seattle customers. Each summer they rented a two-story house on Stubbs Island near Tofino on the west coast of Vancouver Island. These selected customers were flown in from Seattle in a special (ice equipped) Beaver aircraft for three days of superb Coho fishing. And as a valued supplier, and fellow fishermen, I was asked to join the group to provide a little Canadian content.

On my first trip there I arrived equipped with my large, wooden, salmon-reel and a hefty rod only to find that this group of six, (obviously, well-to-do) Yankees was using light weight rods equipped with surprisingly small reels. It just didn't seem to make sense, and it wasn't until I was persuaded to try one, and had it explained to me just how skillfully this reel could handle any size of salmon, that I was sold. The trick was to set the reel at zero-drag, lay the rod in the bottom of the boat with just the tip extended above the transom, or preferably right next to the motor, and troll the bucktail flies, held just under the surface with light shot, about 8 to 10 feet behind the boat. By turning the motor back and forth continuously you were able to vary the velocity of the prop-wash over the bucktails and give them a most natural action.

And therein was the beauty of the 109: at zero-drag the bucktail was held gently in and out of the prop wash of the outboard, and when a fish struck the technique was to let it run for 100 feet or more while you move the lever back and tighten the drag so the reel action became simplex, just like a kid's reel. There was a certain elegance in the way these fellows fished: they never interfered with the fish until it made a good run aft the boat and, after the hook was set, all the drag effect of the reel was created with your thumbs. Their reasoning was elegantly philosophical: you were insulting the noble salmon if you used the

mechanical drag on the reel; in fact you were roundly-ridiculed for doing so. After a summer of challenges, the calluses on my thumbs were handsome.

Another interesting aspect of this bucktailing technique was to use an outboard that did not exhaust through the prop at low RPM. In those days the only such motor was the Mercury. At slow or idling speeds it exhausted through two ports high up in the housing above the water and created what we called: *black* (bubble-less) *turbulence*. The antics of our custom bucktails (home made) in this swirling current must have been irresistible. Occasionally an overanxious Coho would come charging up the wake of the boat, miss the fly and bang into the transom. I was told that on one occasion a Coho came over the transom beside the motor and ended up in the boat. There was no mention of whether they threw it back or not,— but I'd give odds that they did.

Another surprising result of this method of fishing was the fact that generally only the large Coho would come this close to the boat; our simple assumption being that probably only the largest fish would venture so close.. On two occasions, two exceptionally large Coho (25 and 27 pounds) were first assumed in the spring salmon until the chap at the ice-house pointed out that they didn't have a black mouth.. A day's catch would usually range in weight from 8 to 15 pounds.

After my initiation and on my next business trip to Seattle, Rod B., the CEO and Rod C., the VP, decided that I needed a 109 and took me shopping. That's when they bought the 12, divided them up four each, and I became a dedicated 109 fan. For the rest of my fishing days, whether in the interior after trout or after the illustrious Coho, I never used any other reel.

Of the original four, I gave one to my son, reserved one for parts, and put two into service. On new light-weight rods they were in constant service well for over 40 years. Many parts were replaced but they never malfunctioned or failed in catching close to 1000 Coho and Springs (King//Chinook). We caught many Springs that ranged from 25 to 35 pounds, and on one occasion, a rainy day with a stiff breeze blowing, had a 43 pound spring come up and take the fly just 10 feet behind the boat. I was under the canvas steering the boat when my partner hollered that what looked like a seal was coming up the wake after the fly. We boated it, but not until we had coaxed it into the lee of a small island so we could stand up in the boat.

Over the years we improved our technique in many ways: considered the pros and cons of aluminum, fiberglass, and wood in hull designs; the different makes of motors; vibration suppression in motor mounts, the effects of sound above and below the water; visible motion in the boat; the sharpness and color of propeller blades, . . . and on and on.

Next to the need for black turbulence, hull materials were the most significant. We tried aluminum boats and they were not in any way suitable; the hull resonance from the gas outboards sent the baitfish into a frenzy. The two Rods had glass boats and they did very well, but the ultimate platform was the wooden boat. I built my boat out of wood and shock-padded the motor mount area. It turned out able to out fish the other boats every which way. It wasn't until Rod B. went underwater and noted the variety in hull-resonances from the different engines that we began to understand some of the finer points.

But in the end our technical wizardry was little more than enhanced persuasion; a con-job to lure our quarry. From then on it was the exquisitely-simple design of the 109 and the virtuoso-performance of two, callused thumbs that created a piscatorial ballet, without equal. It was the purest of art form, and I (sans tu tu) one of the privileged.

However, one of the last trips I made was probably the most interesting and exciting. We were having engine trouble with the main boat and in desperation we borrowed a 14 foot *aluminum* skiff equipped with a 10 hp Johnson. When we found the fish I mounted an electric outboard and we trolled the bucktails in the usual manner, but in total silence and without any hull resonance. The results were astounding; the fish, seemingly without fear, came right up to the boat and we had the best catch and release day ever.

We were all equipped with CB radios and my call-sign was Unit Five. Rod B's wife handled the radio back at base and used to tweak the Rods by calling me as "*high boat*" rather than Unit Five. Incidentally, the Rods always had a large stock of 109 reels on inventory. When their customers flew back to Seattle with their fish on ice in the floats of the Beaver, they were welcome to take the rod and reel they had used home with them.

As you have noted by now, the key to my years of incredible fishing was the 109. The thrill of challenging a large Coho,— *the world's most enthusiastic, surface-fighting salmon*,— with just two thumbs is difficult to put into words. To use breathtaking, exhilarating and awesome barely scratches the surface, and for more, I'd have to wake up "Webster". Anyone of the countless, daily sorties that I made over the years would have been a lifetime-thrill to many a fisherman. And if you are wondering where all the salmon went, our clan and the neighborhood enjoy the finest of fresh salmon most every summer.

Submitted by Jack Elgie