

# A Silver Retrospect



Photo by Captain Robert McCue

*By Captain Robert McCue*

**“W**hat on earth was that, Tat?” was the reaction of A.W. Dimock in February of 1882, near Shell Island at the mouth of the Homosassa River to his boatman, Tat.

Tat replied, “Mus’ be a tarpum,” as the two gaped at the fury jumping on the end of Dimock’s line. However, after an epic battle, Dimock got the fish to the boat where it was lost on a straightened gaff designed to hold nothing larger than a salmon. There was no tackle available in those days to defeat the silver king by rod and reel, let alone land one.



Nineteenth century tarpon pioneers fished with hand lines and wooden rowboats until the development of big game rod and reel tackle.

Photo courtesy of Florida State Archives

**D**imock traveled the unspoiled west coast of Florida living off the land with his son and camera-man, Julian. The two endured the rawness of old Florida and documented their enduring adventures with the earliest photographs and stories published in several peri-

odicals and three books called *The Book of Tarpon*, *Dick in the Everglades* and *Florida Enchantments*. The father and son were fearless and risked life in their pursuit of tarpon and side show attractions such as moonshine stills. Dimock detailed several close encounters with giant sharks that preyed upon their tarpon that, on occasion, jet-tisoned them from their canoes and wooden rowboats.

Prior to the times of Dimock, tarpon were considered only to be captured by harpoon and finished off with lance. Dimock never received the credit for landing the first tarpon on rod and reel and the debate on who did still exists today. In 1885, Frank S. Pinckney wrote an article that was published in *The Fort Myers Press* and *Forest and Stream* detailing the rod and reel of capture of a 93-pound tarpon on March 12, 1885 by W. H. Wood from the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River. The two New Yorkers are credited with being the first to expose Florida tarpon fishing. The claim to Wood's

first rod and reel tarpon was later surrounded in classic tarpon controversy when *Forest and Stream* reported that the first sizable tarpon was caught in 1878 by S.H. Jones of Philadelphia at Indian River Inlet. Unfortunately for Dimock, his 1882 event told in the *Book of Tarpon* was not published until 1911. Soon after Pinckney's article in 1885 and prior to his subsequent 1888 book, *The Tarpon or Silver King*, tarpon were given a gamefish status to protect them from harpoons (methods known as "striking" or "graining") and nets that were considered the only productive methods for taking tarpon.

In 1886, The London Observer exposed Florida's giant tarpon fishery to the international community and the English sportsmen. In 1889, Robert Grant's "Tarpon Fishing in Florida" can be fairly accredited as the first "how to and where to" national publication on tarpon fishing in Florida.

By 1889, Florida Southern Railroads in Jacksonville had completed trade rail routes that included a



Photo courtesy of Florida State Archives

The cable station/Army barracks in Punta Rassa doubled as the first tarpon resort in Florida.

terminal in Punta Gorda. Early tarpon anglers from the northeast and England would travel to Punta Gorda by train and then take a five-hour “steamer” voyage to reach one of Florida’s earliest fish camps “The Tarpon House” in Punta Rassa or the San Carlos Hotel in St. James City. Later in 1894, Woods’ fishing partner and friend John M. Roach bought Useppa Island and built the first tarpon resort called the “Tarpon Inn.” The area took earnest when in 1908 Barren Collier bought Useppa Island from Roach and built another “Tarpon Inn” on Gasparilla Island and made the Island’s town of Boca Grande world famous as the “tarpon fishing capital of the world.”

Rod and reel technology improved when reel innovator Edward vom Hofe showed up on the scene to test his reels against giant tarpon. Mr. vom Hofe obtained the first patents of the “star drag” that he designed to counter the fury of giant tarpon and they are still universally used today.

Edward vom Hofe further etched his name in the archives of history by landing the largest tarpon ever taken by rod and reel on April 30, 1898; a 210 pound tarpon taken in Captiva Pass. With the generation of mass publicity, the development of transportation, and the refinement of big game tackle, Florida became world-renowned for its shallow water tarpon fishing—forever.

Tarpon are survivors. In fact, the *Megalops atlanticus* some scientists believe, are one of two (*Megalops cyprinoids*—oxeye tarpon found primarily in the Indo Pacific) of the last living family members of many other species of tarpon that existed



Photo by Captain Robert McCue

**No inshore fish tests the mettle of anglers from all walks of life like the tarpon.**

millions of years ago.

We know little about the life history of *Megalops atlanticus*, but we can learn more. We know tarpon

are prehistoric animals, traveling the warm seas back as far as one hundred million years ago. They are one of the few fish known to us that possess a physostomus swim bladder. This unique organ is attached to the esophagus and acts much like a lung allowing the tarpon to actually breathe air in from the atmosphere. They obtain this air by “rolling” at the surface and taking a gulp. The swim bladder plays a key role in the survival of juvenile tarpon. Juvenile tarpon are sub-dependent on breathing air from the atmosphere and it permits them to exist and grow in places where only they can

survive such as in shallow, oxygen-depleted and stagnant waters, thus preventing their natural enemies (sharks in particular) from reaching



Photo by Captain Robert McCue

**Edward vom Hofe designed and patented the first reels designed to tackle giant tarpon and tuna in the late 1800s. The 4/0 reel on the left used a clicker and leather thumb pad as the brake. On the right is an early vom Hofe’s “star drag” 4/0 tarpon reel. “Star drag” technology is still used today.**



them. Adult tarpon are likely not dependant on natural air breathing and they likely roll as a developed behavioral habit from their youth. The swim bladder is also a gift to tarpon anglers from the fish gods, as their rolling makes finding and fishing Florida tarpon possible.

It is believed that the spring arrival of tarpon to our Gulf Coast is part of their spawning cycle. Where they come from and where they actually spawn are probably the oldest and most frequently asked questions that remain a mystery to this day. A well-accepted theory is that the fish travel from the edge of the continental shelf from the southwest, likely from somewhere off the Yucatan Peninsula.

I believe the arrival of tarpon to our west coast shoreline is a social activity where the fish mass together in both genders as a courtship behavior. They seem to cycle between the flats, passes and beaches and then head to the edges of the Gulf Loop Current to spawn. Fishing peaks for them in late April, May, June and July. However, savvy tarpon anglers can find the juvenile fish in our area all year, and additionally, find the giants in March, August, September, October, and November.

Tarpon often display a courtship behavior in which they "mill" or "daisy chain." On close inspection I have seen the fish bumping and rubbing up against each other as if they were spawning, though

scientists maintain the fish are not actually spawning during this display of affection.

Offshore, a female releases a batch of unfertilized eggs (oocytes) that become fertilized by the males milt and shortly later become larvae. The larvae take on the appearance of a ribbon or an eel. One mature female may spawn as many as 20 million undeveloped tarpon. The mortality of these larvae is very high, as they are at the mercy of the sea (they become the food source of zooplankton and fish). These larvae are great swimmers and with the help of the winds and tides make a great journey of 125 miles back to the estuaries (if they are lucky), where they will once



Lipping a monster.

again undergo three distinct changes from a transparent ribbon-like eel to the form of a fish that can easily be recognized as a micro-tarpon.

The “micro-tarpon” find protection in the estuarine mangroves and non-tidal pools where they engage in a period of rapid growth. In this early stage of fish form, they find and live in ditches and retention ponds. Many of these areas appear to be land locked and may be many miles from the Gulf. The water is often very low in oxygen but their unique swim bladder allows them a safe haven from predators who would not even consider tasting this stagnant soup. To actually find these tarpon nurseries, you can’t help but wonder how they can live

there, how they got there, and how they will ever get out.

As tarpon grow to about two feet in length they move once again to a larger body of water. They are fond of deep man-made canals and holes far up Florida’s coastal rivers and in the upper reaches of large bays. When they reach sexual maturity at the ages of seven to 13 years, they join in with adult Gulf tarpon. Male tarpon attain life spans of over 40 years while females may live longer than 50 years. A female tarpon held in captivity at the John G. Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, Illinois died in 1998 at the age of 63.

In an 1889 tarpon fishing article, O.A. Mygatt wrote, “Verily, the

lover’s jealousy may be a green-eyed monster, but compared with the jealousy of a tarpon fisherman towards his brother sportsman it counteth as nothing.” Tarpon have a long history of establishing social classes, but they are reserved for no Waltonian, nor Tom Sawyer. Tarpon are a public resource to all (under the rules and regulations of the state of Florida). Tarpon are the most non-discriminate big game catches in the world due to their habitat of close proximity to our shoreline.

Fishermen from all walks of life and social status catch them. They can be taken from our area’s piers, docks, roadside ditches, causeways, bridges, bays, rivers, beaches, passes, canals and jetties. They are fished

**Left to right: Aaron Woo with deckhand Brian Timmons, and Jerry Corcoran pose with a giant Boca Grande silver king.**



*Photo by Captain Robert McCue*

# TARPON

from kayaks, canoes, rowboats, jon boats, and jet skis to \$50,000 skiffs and million dollar yachts. They are tackled on everything from Zebco Rhinos to \$1,500 fly rods. By the very nature of tarpon habits, physique and temperament, they may not be for everyone who likes to go catching, however, they are the pinnacle in the hunt for big game and for those with the passion for the sport of fishing. Giant tarpon are the ultimate aquatic safari and the major league championship of fishing equivalent to the Super Bowl, the World Series, the Daytona 500, the Tour de France or the World Cup.

Florida currently holds 29 world records for tarpon and all of the major fly-fishing records have been caught off the west coast in the Homosassa area. In 1982, Billy Pate set

a fly-fishing record on 16-pound tippet with a 188-pound tarpon caught off of Homosassa. For 19 years some of the world's best fly-fishermen and guides attempted to break Pate's record and to be the first to land a giant tarpon on fly over 200 pounds. Fishing off of Homosassa on May 11, 2001, Jim Holland, Jr. guided by Steve Kirkpatrick caught the first tarpon over 200 pounds on fly with a 202-pound eight-ounce fish on 20-pound tippet. The 16-pound tippet record was shattered on May 13, 2003, with a 190-pound nine-ounce tarpon caught by Tom Evans, Jr. who was guided by Al Doparik. The Florida state record is 243 pounds and was caught by Gus Bell off of Key West in 1975. The all tackle world record (additionally certified as the 80-pound class record) is

286 pounds, nine ounces caught by Max Domecq in Rubane, Guinea-Bissau, Africa on March 20, 2003.

Back in yesteryear it was common for guides and anglers to hang tarpon from "brag boards" for photo opportunities and to feed their ego. Such images in this modern era are subject to much ridicule. A conservation minded sportfishing community finds these acts unacceptable and repulsive in the twenty-first century as the fish have no value dead (however, biologists do try to gain possession of these harvested fish for research—a far better idea than a dumpster). In 1989, the state enacted a \$50 possession tag requirement and imposed a two fish harvest limit per day. Florida reported tarpon kills went from 342 in 1989 to fewer than 70 in 2003. In the present day,



Chris Forrey (right) and deckhand Brian Timmons just prior to release.

Photo by Captain Robert McCue



tarpon populations are strong statewide. However, natural and man-made variables such as red tide, water temperatures, salinity, pollution, habitat destruction (development), predation, and angling pressure have kept fishery managers vigilant. The State of Florida, private sectors, and academia are expanding their research into such areas as genetic profiling, satellite tracking and ultrasonic telemetry.

Looking back through the earliest days of recorded tarpon sportfishing, man has always been the Achilles' heel of the tarpon. In today's modern era of unprecedented growth and development taking over tarpon habitat, hi-tech and lightning speed communications such as the Internet, cable/satellite television, and cellular devices making finding the tarpon easier, and the advancement of the most technical fishing gear known to man making the "catching" more efficient, tarpon have their plate full in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to try and stay ahead in the game of angling. Perhaps with a new writing angle of intrigue and infatuation concerning this most special animal and its place in our fishing history, we can all respite, find, or develop a deep and proactive respect for the tarpon. Thank you, *Megalops atlanticus*, for all you do! ———

*Captain Robert McCue has been a professional fishing guide on Florida's Gulf Coast for nearly 20 years. His clients have shattered eight IGFA world records and have placed or won many of the area's prestigious fishing tournaments. Capt. McCue is a long time Mercury Platinum Fishing Guide and Cotee Master Guide.*

*Capt. McCue has participated in many high profile conservational fishery issues to include attaining the status of gamefish for redfish in Florida and the passing of the Net Limitation Amendment. He is called upon by world-renowned fishery biologists to assist in tagging and sampling programs for several species state wide. In 2005, he led the state with providing the most tarpon DNA fin clipping samples to tarpon researchers. Various fisheries' professionals consult his expertise to enhance their own successes. Tackle and fishing industry specialists enlist his abilities for testing new products and find his suggestions for research and development invaluable.*

*While well known as being passionate with his vocals concerning his love for fishing and the resource (for all), he lives a private life surrounded by his family. He is a former United State Marine. The water serves as the catalyst for his great escape and his greatest ambition is to see his 17-year-old daughter, Sara, graduate from college.*

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**Deckhand Brian Timmons (left) and Fran Baltmiskis, display the result of another exhausting battle.**

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