

THE OLD BOAT

Joan Gorga

As soon as we reached ice-out on Gregg Lake last spring, it was time to collect the first water samples of the season for analysis at the NH DES Limnology lab. It's always a fun job, but not one I can do by myself. Who could I possibly convince to head out onto the lake with me for water sampling in mid-April?

Surprisingly, Ben Pratt immediately agreed, but he had witnessed my kayak ice-breaking a few days earlier and tentatively inquired as to what we would be using for transportation on the still ice-cold water. Neither canoe nor kayak seemed appropriate at that time of year for a job that requires lots of reaching over the side into the water and lowering sensors thirty-five feet down to the lake bottom.

I thought about the little old aluminum boat sitting forlornly in front of my cousin's cabin on the lake. I didn't think he'd mind if we "borrowed" her. He and I, along with siblings and friends, had great adventures in that boat, many of which led to dents in the boat, motor recoveries from the lake bottom by scuba divers who were paid with blueberry pies, and needless to say, parental disapproval. That boat had appeared out of nowhere (as I remembered) nearly fifty years ago to replace the last of the wooden boats my grand-

father made every few years for transporting our family of six, along with dogs, friends, food, and stacks of library books to our camp at the other end of the lake.

We had a twenty-horsepower motor for the last heavy wooden boat. My brother Byron (showing his Antrim-native ingenuity) made a pair of water skis with 1" x 6" wooden planks, bent flattened tomato cans for tips and swimming fins to hold our feet. Byron and I could get entirely out of the water behind that boat; our older brother George skied ankle-deep, and our father, Skeezie Caughey, never got farther out than waist-deep, but we all had great fun.

In spite of our best maintenance efforts, the old yellow boat eventually had to be retired, and my father came around the bend in the aluminum boat one day. The twenty-horsepower motor made that boat fly, but we had to load all the passengers into the bow to keep the boat from catching the wind and flipping over backwards. My father quickly replaced the motor with a stately six-horsepower, but my cousins and I had already discovered, among other things, that if we headed for shore near their cabin at full speed, we could get the bow all the way up onto the road.

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As Ben Pratt and I packed the water-testing equipment into the dented old aluminum boat, he looked fondly at her and asked who owned her. I could only say that I didn't remember where my father had found her, although Sears and Keene did come dimly to mind, and we all assumed she belonged to my cousin these days, since she lived at his cabin and he (usually) paid for the registration. Ben looked the boat over some more and said she looked an awful lot like one Bob Caughey had many years ago; Ben was sure he'd been out on the lake fishing with Bob in her. Ben and I had a lovely time rowing around taking measurements and collecting samples for the next five hours, and returned the old boat to her perch.

A few days later, Bob's grandson Jason Warner confirmed that the old aluminum boat had indeed spent quite a few years in Bob's hands, and had been used for many fine fishing trips. As a teenager, I had figured out that if I wanted to talk to Bob, it was best to offer to go fishing with him, although I also found out it was best not to catch more fish than he did! One evening in particular I went out just to keep him company in the old boat, and didn't really want to catch anything. But I kept pulling in one fish after the other while he never got a nibble. Bob, being somewhat competitive,

got madder and madder as the evening progressed. We tried switching sides, but that didn't work, and I tried not putting a worm on my hook, but when he caught me doing that, he decided his wife was waiting for him at home.

Bob usually went fishing in the old boat. But one time when I rounded the corner out of the cove in the boat, I found a soaking wet Bob standing on a large rock over the water, with the contents of his pockets and all his possessions laid out to dry. He had forgotten he was in the canoe instead of the boat, and flipped it while casting. He was most embarrassed to be caught like that, but since the story was bound to get out, he asked for our help in retrieving his favorite fishing pole from the lake bottom. We still call that rock "Bob's Bluff."

After dinner one evening at camp, I was sent to do the ice-cream run. Since we didn't have any electricity, we couldn't keep ice cream frozen. For a rare treat, we would leave some ice cream in my cousins' freezer at the other end of the lake, and someone would go get it as soon as we finished dinner. Of course, if you were sent to get the ice cream, you escaped doing the dishes... So I merrily headed out, but forgot to tighten down the motor before starting it up. Just as I got to the ledges, right where my father always said the rocks went straight down 100 feet (a *slight* exaggeration, I now know) the motor jumped off the back of the boat, but I managed to hold onto the handle, which was slick with oil. I struggled for at least half an hour with the motor slipping in my hands. I couldn't pull it all the way out of the water without flipping the boat, but I was determined not to let it go down. Eventually, those left back at the camp began to wonder if I was eating the ice cream by myself, and a search party came to the rescue.

Ben and I recently took the old boat out for the fifth time for water sampling this summer. Generous Antrimites have lent us a trolling motor and a battery to speed up our sampling time. The old boat has performed admirably, and is only partly to blame for the fact that one of us has fallen into the lake twice and gotten blood all over one set of data sheets. We've tried not to notice the scarred bottom, and I haven't had the heart to point out the spot in the bow where water starts leaking in as soon as we put her in the water. It's more satisfying to remark about how much water we've managed to spill while collecting our samples.

The old boat has lived many different lives. The cousin she lives with now remembers going to Sears in Keene with his father to pick her up, so I reckon she's come back to her original home. I wonder what stories she would tell about the multiple generations of Rendas, Caugheys and Pratts she's ferried about. She brings out all sorts of fond memories every time we climb into her. ☞

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