

ALMOST DROWNED BY A CATFISH

by Gary Knehans

One of the legendary sportsmen of old passed away in late March, 1894. William Wynne was his name, the man for whom Wynne's Ford on the Gasconade River was named.

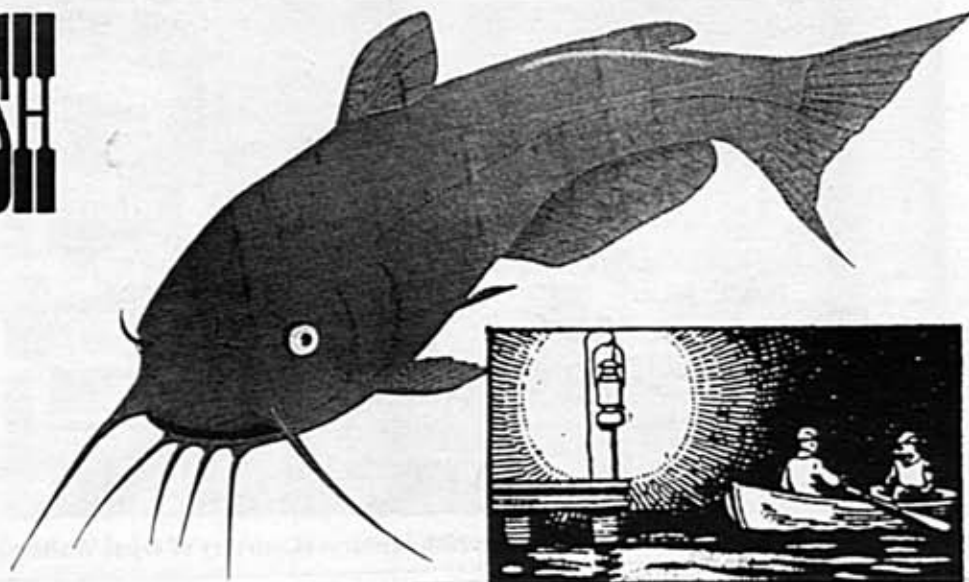
In addition to being a successful farmer, Wynne spent what spare time he had hunting and fishing along the river. Before his eyesight failed him late in life, the old farmer was well known for his gigging skills and his accuracy with an old Kentucky rifle. Wynne kept a complete record of the deer he killed in Maries and Phelps Counties. He was said to have harvested nearly 2700 deer in his lifetime. Many catfish and sturgeon that he gigged averaged over 100 pounds.

When failing eyesight and other infirmities kept him from hunting and fishing later in life, the old man enjoyed visiting the campfires of the many sportsmen who came into his neighborhood. Many times around the warm glow of a flickering campfire, Wynne regaled captive audiences with stories of days when bears, panthers, and deer were as plentiful as cattle along the Gasconade River.

Perhaps the most remembered story was one told shortly before his death about

a gigging incident that happened years earlier.

"One night in April, when the river was clear and low," he said, "I went with a companion to gig a mess of fish. We had a small, rudely constructed boat, but we were used to it, and under ordinary circumstances managed to navigate without much trouble. But on this night I speak of, the boat demonstrated its frailties. After gigging numerous ordinary buffalo and a couple of fine Jackfish, we sighted an enormous catfish and took after it. We chased it from point to point for nearly an hour before I got a chance to hit him with my gig. My aim was sure, but I did not strike as near the head as I wished to, and after about half an hour's hard fight, the fish ran upon a shoal, and we succeeded in landing it in the boat. It was the biggest cat that I ever saw, and we were so excited by the chase and capture of the monster that we failed to take the necessary precautions after we had boated the big fellow, but began pulling for shore. Hardly a dozen strokes were taken with the paddle before the fish flopped against the side of the boat, and, fearing that he would get out, I threw myself upon him and made a grab with my left hand for his gills. I



managed to insert the hand, and as I did so, the cat opened his mouth and my hand went clear through his ponderous jaws, when he closed them with a snap upon my wrist, gave a sudden lunge, and over went the boat, the fish, myself, and companion striking the water at about the same time. The old cat had me foul, and it was simply a matter of luck on my part that I am here tonight to tell how the fight ended. It happened that the water was only about 4 feet deep where the boat capsized, with a bar gradually sloping upward, and after being pulled under several times by the catfish, I managed to work myself on to the same shoal where we had landed the fish, but when I did so I was unable to stand up, and were it not for the assistance of my

companion I would have been dragged back into deep water again, as the cat never relaxed his steel trap jaws a particle. Sitting on the bottom, with the water rushing about my chin, my companion reached down into the fish's mouth, grappling him deep in the gullet, and hung on until the monster was choked to death, and my imprisoned left arm released. By wading and swimming we reached the shore, found our boat about 100 yards below, where it had lodged against the bank, and then went back and secured the old cat that gave us the fight of our lives. The fish weighed just 151 pounds, and was undoubtedly the biggest fish that was ever gigged in the Gasconade."

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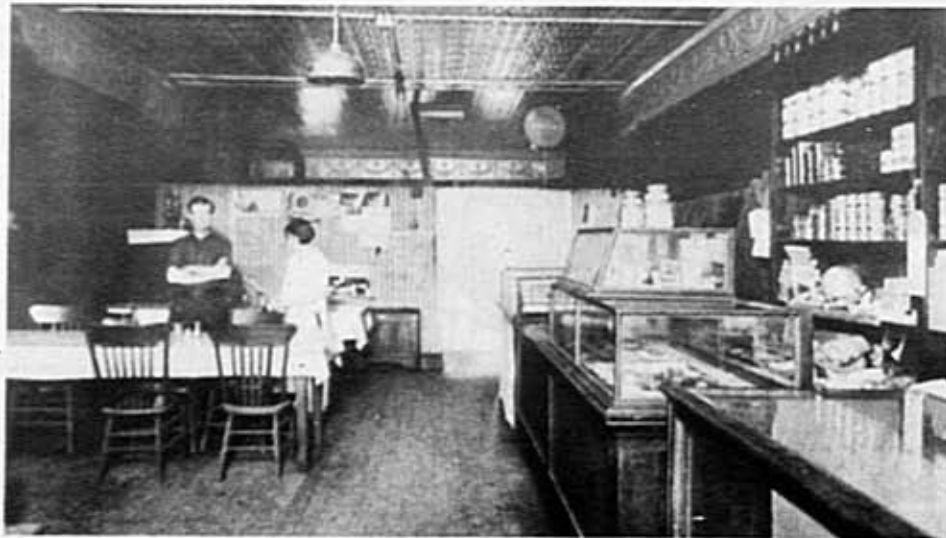
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Old Crocker store in the early part of the 20th century. (Courtesy of Opal Walters) Charley Tevey's Tack and Shoe Repair in Crocker. (Courtesy of Charley Tevey family)



Panoramic view of Crocker north looking south. Little dirt road is now 17. House center left is where Artie Ferguson lives. House upper left is the old Hoops home. In back of it is the old Christian Church which later burned. (Courtesy of Opal Walters)

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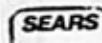
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