

You Say Catawba and I Say Catalpa by Mike Wilson

I stopped at a local country convenience and bait store a couple of summers ago to get some minnows and redworms. On the door of the freezer was a crudely lettered sign that read, "Catawba Worms \$2.50." I was stunned. Could it really be? I opened the door and there to my amazement lay a dozen vacuum-sealed packs of beautiful green and black striped caterpillars. What a blast from the past!

[First, for the record, they are actually Catalpa worms since they live off the leaves of the American Catalpa tree. I fully understand the popular etymology since everything else in this region is named for the Indian tribe, including the county, the river, and the college. Why not the worm?]

It is summer 1962 and I am riding up to the Tennessee River with my granddaddy in his black Chevy pickup. It is hot as the devil since he has no air conditioner. We are necessarily taking the old state highways since I-40 has not been completed. As we drive through the outskirts of Parsons, Granddaddy suddenly throws on the brakes and I nearly bust my noggin on the steel dashboard. (This was the pre-seat belt era.) In a vacant lot there is a lone tree that appears half-eaten. He grabs his gunny sack—always kept handy to harvest Nature's bounty including persimmons, black walnuts, hickory nuts, unsupervised sweet corn, etc.-- from under the seat and we run to the tree. Every branch is loaded with fat green and black caterpillars and we fill up about a third of the sack with the ones we can reach plus a bunch of leaves. Then we hop back in the truck and leave quickly. Only then can I ask, "What are we going to do with them?" "You'll see," he replies.

That afternoon on the river we start baiting our jugs with the Catalpa worms, and I can see that the first ones we set out are already running away crazily. [These sealed Clorox jugs have a short line with a weight and a catfish hook and are normally put out in little fleets of 50 or so to let the wind drift them over likely feeding areas. You've got a big one when a 2-qt. jug goes all the way under!] At one point, we had fish on 10 jugs at once, so we had a great time running them down, pulling them up, and netting the catfish. I am pretty sure it was our best haul ever—we filled 4 stringers-- and unfortunately it was the only time we ran across a hatch like that in my youth. They certainly were more pleasant to deploy than the buckets of rotten mussels he got for a dollar from the mussel boats, who only wanted the shells to be made into buttons, out on the big river.

So here they are at long last. I take all of them from the freezer and carry them to the register. "Will you be getting more?" "About once a week. You can call to see if they're in." "Thanks, I sure will."

Well, that mother lode sure heated up our catfishing fast. One day we caught 9 good cats at Lake Norman with a single pack of 10. Then we went out with my buddy the DC—a lifelong outdoorsman and U of Texas fan thanks to long residence there-- on High Rock, and I soon had him forsaking his cutbait and netted shad. He, in turn, even caught the attention of his skeptical grandson, a fisherman so accomplished at a tender age that he already had endorsement deals. After the DC had outcaught him 5-0, he finally said, "Ok, give me one of those!" How did their outing go? "Live well got too full. We just kept the 20 biggest ones," the DC happily reported.

I eagerly called the store the following Monday to check on the shipment. "Yeah, we've got about 20 packs that just came in." "I'll be right over!" When I got there half an hour later and opened the freezer, there were only 10. When I asked where the others went, the clerk said, "Funny...a guy in an orange cap just came in and bought half..." My mild consolations were knowing that at least our band of brothers had cornered the market and that the good ol' DC would never leave me completely hangin'...